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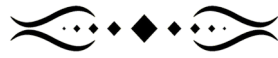
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SIZE MATTERS

Chaos and Carnage MC, 1

Sam Crescent

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Chapter One

Maddie French glanced down at her watch to check the time. It was safe to say her date wasn't coming. He was over an hour late, and she was growing tired of the pitying looks directed her way. She sipped at her water and tapped her fingers on the table. If she ate now, they would all know she'd been stood up. Not that anyone was supposed to care, but she saw the disguised points.

She pulled out her cell phone and checked to see if he'd left her a message, but there was nothing.

Ever since she had shared her picture with this guy she'd been talking to for months, he'd been different.

She ran fingers through her long brown hair, which she'd spent a good amount of time curling so it didn't just lay flat. This was why she hated internet dating. She never photographed well. Her mother used to tell her often enough that her best features were always hidden. Not that her mother would ever divulge what she considered her best features.

She put her cell phone away and took a deep breath.

This wasn't the first time she'd been stood up, wouldn't be the last time either. She could pretend so many things as to why her date didn't arrive. A car accident. Held up at work. He was helping someone give birth in a subway, but the truth was that it was because of her size.

Her mother had always told her no man wanted a fat girl. Her mother, God rest Delia French's heart, didn't mince her words. Some people of Carnage even thought Delia was responsible for putting her husband, Nigel, into an early grave with all of her *real* talk. No one knew her parents were as bad as each other.

They kept everything real.

Where another parent might tell their child the weight would drop of them as they got older, or that they were beautiful, she wasn't told that.

Nope.

Her parents told her she was fat, ugly, and that she was going to have to do something to have any chance of having a husband. In fact, Delia had told her she should just accept that she was going to be an old maid. At thirty years old, she didn't consider herself an old maid, but so far, her parents hadn't been wrong.

She was overweight.

The world didn't want to admit it, but size really did matter to a great deal of people. In the small town of Carnage, there was no one who wanted her.

Clenching her hands into tight fists, she felt sickness swirling in her gut. To anyone who looked at her, it was her size-twenty curves that spoke volumes. It wasn't the volunteer work she did at the local animal shelter or the schools. Nor was it the hard work she put in to every single town fair.

Life after high school should have been easier. Instead, she'd passed through a multitude of jobs, failed her driving license more times than she could count, which meant she walked everywhere, and never had a long-lasting relationship.

Her only boyfriend was in the last year of high school, and he'd dumped her after taking her virginity in the back of his truck. He was a nerd, and no one had paid attention to him. She'd been the fat girl, and as he told her at the time, he'd taken pity on her. Neither of them should have entered adulthood a virgin, and that was his community service to her.

She'd never been more embarrassed in her life.

Maddie glanced around at the couples. It wasn't even a fancy restaurant. It was a small eating section at the bar in Carnage.

She rubbed her temples and then jumped as she heard the roar of bikes arrive outside.

There was only one bunch of people who rode bikes in Carnage. The Chaos and Carnage MC that lived all around town. They owned several businesses, including this bar, the local mechanic shop, the gym, and a few other places that were way too many to count.

She used to go to school with one of the members, Grant Reynolds. He'd been a popular bad boy, and no one had messed with him because of who his brother was.

As if the thought of him conjured him up, Kirk Reynolds, known only as Bull, entered the bar. He had several guys at his back. Many of them she didn't know the name of. She had always steered clear of the MC group that filled their town. Women wanted to fuck them. Men wanted to be them. They were the group most people wanted to be associated with.

She knew they helped a lot of business in town. They even offered protection, and in the last ten years, there had been no violence or death

brought to the streets of Carnage. She had even seen him talking to the local sheriff, Dylan, from time to time. Not that she was a stalker. She just happened to notice a whole lot of things. People often ignored her presence.

With the MC here, it was time for her to leave. Her parents had always told her never to get muddled up with them.

She finished her water and got to her feet, heading toward the bar about to pay for the few drinks she'd ordered.

A large man stepped in front of her, stopping her from going.

The heavy scent of leather and oil filled her senses. Lifting her head, she came face to face with Bull. His green eyes held a slight glare as he looked at her.

She noticed the scar most people called ugly, but she didn't think for a single second it lessened his appeal. Some women had said he was ugly. How the scar made them think of some horror movie villain, but they must have seen it when it first happened. Staring at him now, she saw he was a man of substance. Even the way he carried himself, there was an element of power to him no one could detract from.

"Hello, Maddie," he said.

It didn't come as a surprise that he knew her name. Bull wasn't the president of the MC for nothing. She knew he had a very sharp working brain in that skull of his.

"Hello, Bull," she said.

He glanced behind her. "Where are you going so soon?"

She hiked her bag up her shoulder and forced a smile to her lips. "I'm leaving."

Maddie went to walk around him, but he grabbed her arm, stopping her. She had no idea what was going on with him. He had never said more than two words to her, and now he was suddenly touching her.

Looking down at his hand on her arm, then up to his face, she waited.

He didn't let her go.

"Take your hands off me."

"Most women like it when I touch them."

She snorted. "I'm not most women." She pulled her arm away from him. Without another look at him, she made her way toward the counter, where Elizabeth was serving one of the customers.

Normally, she'd leave money on the table, but there had been some kind of theft a few years back so there was a sign that read in large capitals to pay at the counter.

"I'll be right there," Elizabeth said.

Bull hadn't backed off. She felt how close he was.

Seconds passed.

She looked in the mirror overlooking the bar. His biker friends had all taken seats further down, and Bull was leaning against the bar, rather close to her. She had no reason to be gaining this special attention from him.

Elizabeth, fortunately, didn't take too long. She offered her a smile, and she was glad to have taken it.

"I'm so sorry about that. Your date didn't show?" Elizabeth asked.

"You were waiting for a date?" Bull asked.

His deep voice carried, and anyone who didn't know she was waiting for a date would know now.

Maddie forced a smile to her lips. "Yeah, I was. He ... didn't make it."

"Why?"

She took a deep breath and shrugged. "Don't have a clue. You'd have to ask him."

"What's his name?" Bull asked.

"None of your business." She wasn't about to tell Bull anything. He didn't need any explanation as to why she'd been stood up.

"You haven't eaten anything," Elizabeth said.

"It's fine. I want to get out of here." There was only so much embarrassment she could handle in one night.

Her bed, a steamy romance book, and chocolate ice cream were all in her future.

"Have dinner with me," Bull said.

Maddie shook her head. "No thank you."

"Are you too good to eat dinner with me?" he asked.

She rolled her eyes. "Bull, I don't know you. I'm not going to eat with a stranger out of pity. I'm not desperate. Besides, your friends are all waiting for you."

"They can wait."

Maddie laughed. "Of course they can." She paid her bill and turned toward him. "Thank you for being ... sweet, but this isn't the first time and I doubt it will be the last time either." She reached out and put a hand on his arm. She had no clue as to why she did it.

Removing her hand, she kept the smile on her lips as she turned on her heel to leave the bar.

She held on to her bag, took a deep breath, and looked up at the sky. Were her parents wagging their fingers at her, telling her she shouldn't have been so foolish?

Tears filled her eyes, and she lowered her head, wiping at her eyes so no tear would fall. She refused to cry.

Taking a step away from the bar, she headed across town, going toward her apartment building that was only a twenty-minute walk away. She grabbed her cell phone and drew up her profile on the dating app. Maddie didn't take time to think over her decision, she went into the settings and straight to the option to delete profiles, followed by removing her account. Once she had clicked her way through each relevant section, she got the email ping to let her know her account was deleted.

Maddie held her phone tightly as she got to her apartment building. The main doors held a code that each resident was given to be allowed into the building. She typed in her code, and the doors beeped.

She didn't bother with the elevator after having a bad experience on it the first time she moved in nearly ten years ago. It had broken down while she'd been inside it. For six hours, she had been stuck in that small box, and since then, she had only ever taken the stairs. There had been no further breakdowns, but she wasn't willing to risk it.

She went to her apartment on the fourth floor, slid in the key, and twisted the doorknob. This had been home for ten years. After her mother's passing, she'd put her family home on the market. It had sold within weeks to a lovely couple who were starting up a new family. There had been a short time when she had imagined keeping her parents' home, moving in, and hoping one day to start a family.

She hadn't wanted to keep a house that was designed for a family when she was a single woman.

Maddie closed the door of her apartment, flicked on the light, and leaned against her door, staring at her small space. This was her space. The

apartment was an open plan apart from the bedroom. Her kitchen and living room were easily visible from the front door. Her bedroom was through the main door to her right, and she had an en-suite bathroom.

This was her life.

After putting the keys into the dish on the small cabinet to the right, she hung her bag on the hook she'd installed, removed her jacket, and kicked off her heels. She rarely ever wore heels, often preferring pumps or trainers to anything too high. This was going to be the last date she went on.

She had long grown tired of the crappy ones, or like tonight, the no-shows. She was done attempting to find Mr. Right. He wasn't out there, and she was miserable constantly being reminded of that fact.

Bull watched Maddie go.

He didn't want to see her leave, but he'd be lying if he said it was a disappointment considering how juicy her ass was. Running a hand down his face, he moved across the bar to where his boys were waiting for him. Elizabeth didn't keep him waiting long.

"What can I get you boys?" she asked.

They were all older than she was, but she liked to play the role.

"You can tell me, sugar, how long that juicy piece was waiting," Bull said.

"Maddie? You want to know how long she was waiting for her date to arrive?"

He hated repeating himself, but Elizabeth wasn't known to be the brightest tool in the box. Some of the boys liked to keep her on speed dial. She liked to play but not to commit, and his boys were down for the playing.

Bull forced a smile to his lips, determined not to ask again.

"Er, let's see, she arrived just before seven and it's eight thirty now. An hour and a ... er ... half," she said. "It was kind of sad. When she came in, she was all excited. Asked if he'd arrived."

"Did she give a name?"

Elizabeth sighed then groaned. "She sure did, but I've completely forgotten it."

"Get us a couple of beers, please."

“Will do. You know it is such a shame. That’s the second date in the last six months that has been a no-show.” Elizabeth shrugged. “Some men.” She tutted to herself and moved away.

“What was that all about?” Rusty asked.

“None of your business.” He took a seat and waited for his beer to arrive. Truthfully, he didn’t know what the thing was with Maddie French. It wasn’t the first time he’d noticed her. He’d been noticing her for a long time but had never gotten the opportunity to act on it, until now. She was rarely alone, which was ironic as all around town, she wasn’t exactly a social bunny. He’d noticed her at a couple of the town fairs and around town. She volunteered a lot, and seeing as he was a social pariah with the Chaos and Carnage MC, they never mixed in the same circles. She never came to the club. Still, he’d noticed her fine curves for many years now, especially her ass in a pair of jeans, not to mention those ripe tits, just designed to have his head nestled against.

“Here you boys go,” Elizabeth said. She placed their beers on the counter. Pat, like always, was quiet.

Bull lifted the bottle to his lips and took a sip. It was nice and cold, which was what the hot summer night required.

He drank several large gulps before he put the bottle down.

“You want any company later?” Elizabeth asked.

He smirked and shook his head. “Thanks, darlin’, but this beer is all I need.”

Elizabeth had been offering herself to him for a long time. He never took her up on it. There was no desire there. She was a little too skinny for his tastes. Unlike some of the boys, he was careful about who he stuck his dick into. He’d seen what happened to his and Grant’s pop for putting his dick in any woman that would have him. It caused nonstop drama, and he had no room for it in his life.

“What about you, Rusty?” Elizabeth asked.

Rusty nearly choked on his beer. “Nah, thanks, sweetheart. One dose of the clap was good enough.”

Pat waved his hand at her.

He lost interest as she went down to talk to Stacks and Rip. Not all of the guys had followed him down to the bar to have a drink. He wanted a change of scenery. Beer was easy to come by at the clubhouse, but for some

odd reason, the bar called to him tonight. It was a slow night. Most of the customers sat near the restaurant side. Some couples moved on the dance floor, but all in all, it was very slow. He had no doubt rumors would circulate about his interaction with Maddie. Why couldn't he get that woman alone? He didn't like that she'd been on multiple no-show dates. What was her deal?

He took a long sip of his drink, and Rusty sighed.

"Can you believe that chick?" Rusty asked.

"What chick?"

"Elizabeth?"

Bull chuckled. "You took her for a test drive."

"And got itchy balls because of it. Believe me, she didn't even call me by my actual name."

"I don't want to know what she called any of you. It was bad enough that you had to come into the club and announce you had something wrong with your junk, and the fact it went around the whole club. Fucking gross." At least he hadn't been caught with it. The women who circled the club like vultures, he steered well clear of. The women he fucked, they knew the score, and he also made it a habit to never use women who liked to be passed between his men. Again, it was something he learned early in his life as a brother. When he was a young teenager, he'd taken a few girlfriends to the club, and they'd been more interested in gaining the banger's patch than him.

Not that he had a problem with that. Women were free to fuck whomever they wanted. He didn't slut-shame anyone. He simply didn't want to be part of that play.

Finishing his beer, he turned on his stool and looked around the bar. He was a part owner in this place because he'd had no choice but to help out his old friend Thomas who had been pretty desperate after his old man put the profits on a couple of horses that were duds. Nearly lost everything, and Thomas had a family and his mother to take care of.

Bull, being the nice guy that he was, took care of the dad so he wouldn't be making bets on the lives of his family again, and became a part owner of this bar. It wasn't a huge profit, but it helped Thomas out, and they'd been friends since they were in diapers.

An unlikely friendship by all accounts. Thomas was super thin, gangly, with lots of pimples, and a pure nerd. Bull was the biker's son, a rebel, a boy to be feared. They had started talking one day through detention, and they'd been friends ever since.

He was Thomas's best man. No one thought he'd ever wear a suit, but he proved them all wrong.

"Look, I can't help that every single piece of pussy wants a piece of this Rusty machine."

Bull raised a brow at Rusty, who wrinkled his nose.

"Yeah, that doesn't sound right. I'm not some grandpa. Anyway, you know what I mean."

"I'm going to agree with you to just shut you up."

"Nice one." Rusty held up his fist, and Bull merely shook his head.

"Come on, man, bumping fists is cool."

"If you're a teenager, maybe."

"Dude, you're no fucking fun."

"Then you should have come with Grant," he said, mentioning his brother. Out of the two of them, Grant was the wild child, while he was ... the sane, level-headed, responsible one. Not that he hadn't experienced a certain level of crazy during his time, but that was all when he was younger. At forty-two years old with the Chaos and Carnage MC depending on him, he preferred to stay focused rather than going out of his way to pick fights.

"Speaking of Grant, if you want to have any questions asked, talk to him."

"About what?"

"About your girl. We all know those two went to school together. I'm sure Grant has some info on her if you need it," Rusty said. He glanced behind his back and smirked. "A hen party. This must be my lucky night."

"I'll get the doctor on call for some ball cream," Bull said.

"Why don't you come and have some fun with me?" Rusty asked. "We could tag team them. You used to enjoy that."

"Go. I've got to head back to the club." Sitting at the bar didn't appeal to him. He sipped at his beer. Everyone but Pat went to go and corrupt the party full of engaged women.

"Not your scene?" Bull asked.

“No,” Pat said. He’d gotten home five years ago after finishing his final tour, an ex-soldier, but Bull had an idea the man had a lot more going on than being just a man to take orders.

No one talked to Pat about his nightmares, not then, and certainly not now. They were few and far between. Most of the time, they came when he allowed himself to let go. To just drink and drink until the memories faded, but it was like the alcohol let his guard down in his sleep because that was when the real shit happened.

“I’m heading back to the clubhouse. You want to come?”

Pat slapped his hand against the counter. On their way out, their boys cheered for them, and the women pouted as if they didn’t have enough cocks between them to keep them satisfied.

Bull went straight to his bike, straddling his machine that looked brand fucking new. He’d had this beast for nearly twenty years. The first bike his father had ever bought him. The only bike that had ever been purchased for him. He’d kept her in good nick, but being a mechanic helped him to keep all of the club running smoothly.

Turning over the ignition and feeling his baby purr to life, this was the stuff dreams were made of. He revved the gears and felt the power beneath his thighs.

Pat was already out of the bar’s parking lot and on the road. The guy was going to have to talk to someone soon, otherwise, he was going to crack.

Bull, while he was on his own, took a great deal of pleasure in just existing with his bike, enjoying the feel of her, but in doing so, it allowed his mind to wander, and he started to think of Maddie. The sweet, curvy woman he wanted to fuck.

There was no point denying it.

He’d tried to ignore his feelings for her. The desire to bend her over the nearest surface and to rub every single inch of those curves until he memorized them by touch alone. It wouldn’t be a hardship either.

Maddie had a body made for being touched. Actually, she had a body made to be worshiped.

He had fucked his way through a variety of women in his lifetime, and he was always drawn to the curves. To the full-figured woman. Maddie would fit into his arms with ease.

Bull wouldn't be afraid of breaking her, unlike so many other women.

His dick was already getting hard thinking about it, but he wasn't going to bang on some woman's door, demanding to know why she was being so difficult.

Women fell on the floor for him. Practically begged him to fuck them. Maddie wasn't like that. She didn't beg, but one day, she was going to, and that victory would be so sweet.

After pulling out of the parking lot, he headed toward the clubhouse, not caring about the noise he made or the people he disturbed as he pushed his bike into doing what he wanted.

Chapter Two

"I am so sorry, Maddie. You know I would keep you if I could," Casey said.

Maddie sat down in the diner, staring at the large cup of coffee. It wasn't fancy. It didn't have any of the foamed milk she loved so much. It was just a regular cup of coffee and to her, there was nothing wrong in that, but today had sucked.

She worked many jobs. The library being just one of them, but it did take up most of her day. The pay hadn't been great, but now, due to a reduction in funding once again, she had lost that job this very morning.

The main source of her income.

The coffee wasn't going to help.

She needed to find a job, pronto.

The neatly folded newspaper lay on the table, and she had no choice but to open it and start looking.

Since she left high school, she had been employed by the library. Her mother had been so upset with her at the time, wanting to know why she was in such a boring job.

"Good men don't go to the damn library. You are going to die a virgin and alone, Maddie French."

Again, no mincing words from her mother.

She picked up her coffee and took a sip. It was delicious. Carl, the diner's owner, took pride in his food not being stereotyped. If you wanted a good meal, even by candlelight, he would see to it. He was a trained chef who had returned to Carnage, taken over the diner from his father, and turned the once-crumbling building into a place of refuge for most of the townsfolk who didn't want to cook for themselves.

"Hello, darling. You want something to eat?" Beatrice, Carl's wife, came to her table to ask.

"Just some pancakes, please."

"You look like you need someone to talk to."

Maddie smiled. "I'll be fine. Just lost my job."

Beatrice winced. "Crap, Maddie. If I'd known that was on the cards, I wouldn't have hired the two girls I just did to help out around here. You know I would have you in a heartbeat." She put her hand on Maddie's. "I

will go and get those pancakes. I'll get Carl to do his special on them. You may not have a broken heart, but you are upset. Oh, I think that could be a thing. Upset pancakes. What do you think?"

She couldn't help but smile. "They sound right up my street."

Carl had made it a thing right after Valentine's Day to offer food with broken or sad names that were so heavy in fat, salt, and sugar, no one could resist. Of course, he also participated in detox months, offering soups. He was an all-rounder when it came to the food he offered.

The diner was a home in itself, a family.

Sipping at her coffee, she had no choice but to finally flick open the newspaper and start looking for work. Rent wouldn't pay itself. She had a little put away in savings from the sale of her parents' house, and she had donated some of it to help build new kennels for the animal shelter she volunteered at. She had already called them to see if there was an available payable position, which unfortunately, there wasn't.

Glancing through the list of jobs, she reached into her handbag and pulled out a marker. She started to cross off the definite nos, circled the yes jobs, and then left a question mark by the maybes.

Beatrice came out with a stack of pancakes. They appeared to be dripping in maple syrup, chocolate sauce, caramel sauce, sprinkles, and chocolate chips.

"This will give you the energy you need to start looking for that dream job."

"Thank you."

"On the house, sweetheart. You call me if you need anything else."

Cutting into the stack of pancakes, Maddie took a bite. They were so sugary, but she didn't care. The last diet she had been on failed. Who in their right mind gave up carbs? Bread and pasta were just some of the best foods out there. Not to mention pizza, and so many other good things.

There had been no weight loss, as usual.

Chewing on the pancakes, she pulled her cell phone out and started from the top of the yes pile to see which job was still available. The first three were not available, so she had no choice but to cross them off the list, and so it began. The hunt for a job wasn't going to be easy. The job scene was always scarce.

She ate her pancakes, taking her time so she didn't end up in a serious sugar rush. She had just finished a call with the sixth job and put a cross through it when someone sat down at her table.

Lifting her head, she saw Bull had taken a seat opposite her. She'd been so engrossed in her call and food, she hadn't paid attention.

She turned her head toward the windows, and sure enough, there was a line of bikes. The rest of his friends had gone to sit in the middle. Some people left, which was just strange. Yes, Chaos and Carnage was not always a nice group of men, but it had been a long time ago that they started a fight, and if her memory served her well, it was with a bunch of tourists who weren't being very nice to begin with. Bull and his men dealt with them, sending them out of town.

"Do you want me to move?"

"The pancakes look good," Bull said.

Maddie frowned. She held on to her fork, then slid the plate across to him. "Have a try."

He reached across the counter, took her fork, and cut into one of the fluffy but heavily drenched pancakes.

She watched a little too mesmerized as he started to chew on the sweet dessert.

Nibbling on her lip, she refused to think of his face or the simple action of chewing food as highly erotic, but she couldn't help it, he made it seem so.

"Why are you eating the upset pancakes?" Bull asked.

"You know what they are?"

"Not from personal experience, but a few of the guys at the club knew about them. Talked about them as well. They're what Carl offers to someone with a broken heart or sad news. You're not upset about that guy standing you up, are you?"

"Wow, could you have shouted it any louder? I don't think the people in the back heard you." She hated that he pointed out so bluntly the lack of desire men had for her. It wasn't blatant, but seeing as her date didn't show, she could only assume the same thing. Her face slowly heated up under his scrutiny. This sucked.

"You're upset."

“Have you ever been stood up?” She burst out laughing. “Of course you haven’t. You’re like ... this cool guy. There’s no way anyone would dare to stand you up. What was I even thinking in suggesting it?”

“You’re upset.”

“This isn’t the first time I’ve been stood up, and I doubt it will be the last time.” She groaned. That did make her sound pitiful. “I’m trying to find a job, okay? I lost mine at the library.”

“Why?”

“Funding cuts. People are more into ebooks than they are actual books. I don’t know. The town cut the funding.” She shrugged. “So I’m looking for a job. Beatrice knows and so she got Carl to make the pancakes for me. I’m not mourning that guy from last night. In fact, I no longer have an account with any dating app. I’m giving up on all of that.” She wanted the ground to open up and swallow her whole.

She didn’t have many conversations with this man, but talking about her lack of success in life and in dating wasn’t a topic she wanted to share with him.

“You’re looking for a job?” He grabbed the newspaper right from under her hand and scanned through the list.

“Hey, that’s rude. I’m trying to do something here, Bull. Can’t you just leave me alone?” she asked.

“I’ve got a job for you.” He put the paper down.

“Really? It’s not in the paper.”

“I don’t advertise like that. It’s at the shop. Hours can be long. I’d want you in the shop from seven, and most nights I don’t leave ’til six.”

She frowned. “Are you offering me a job?”

“Yep. It’s yours if you want it.”

This was crazy. He took another bite of her pancake.

“Wait a second, what job? Where?”

“At my mechanic shop.”

“Chaos and Carnage Mechanics?”

He smiled. “Pretty cool, huh?”

She rolled her eyes, and she hated that his smile made him seem more ... human.

“What? You putting your club name onto everything you own?”

“It’s a stamp you want, baby,” he said.

“Don’t call me baby.” She licked her dry lips. “I can’t take it.”

“Why not? You too good for a job?”

“What? Hell no. It has nothing to do with that.” She sighed and leaned forward. “I don’t even own a car. I have no experience with mechanics. I wouldn’t have a single clue what I was doing.”

This time, he threw his head back and laughed.

Were the pancakes designed to be eaten, or to launch in a guy’s face for laughing at you? It was a shame she’d already eaten the whipped cream that came with them. The sauces would make a mess all over his face, and his leather jacket.

She’d probably be killed before she had even finished.

“Sweetheart, I’m not offering you a position as a mechanic. You’ll man the desk, or lady it. I don’t care what the correct term is. You’ll take the calls, run the invoices, chase up deliveries, the usual kind of shit. I need someone at my front desk. Grant’s doing a shit job of it, and I’ve got no one else.”

“I won’t need to know anything about cars?”

“Just the stuff I tell you. The job is yours if you want it.”

She was so tempted. “I ... I still think I’m not qualified enough for this position. Can I perhaps, do a temp thing?”

“Temporary?”

“Like maybe take a week’s experience with it. You can see if I’m what you’re looking for, and then I can know if I can handle this job. I don’t want to do anything that would ruin your reputation. I may not own a car, but your shop is highly regarded. I’d hate to ruin it.”

“Babe, with all due respect, my reputation is because I’m damn good with cars. You wouldn’t ruin it.” He slammed his hand on the counter. “Be there in thirty minutes. Your temp can start now.”

“Today?”

“Yes, today. Stop whimpering in your pancakes. I’ll see your ass down at the shop.”

“Wait, what do I wear?”

“Whatever you want. I don’t give out uniforms.” His gaze traveled over her chest. At the library they had requested a certain uniform, mainly a pencil skirt, white blouse, and a jacket. “You’ll do.” He walked away, going to his men.

She watched as he leaned down toward one guy and whispered something in his ear.

Beatrice came over to her table. "You okay, sweetheart?"

"I think I might have just been given a job," she said with a smile.

"Now that is damn good news," Beatrice said. "See, good luck comes to everyone who seeks it."

She was so happy, it was strange.

Bull kind of terrified her, but he had now offered her a job. He couldn't be a bad guy, could he?

She thought about Grant. That guy had been ... horrible. She'd hated him in high school. Would she have to see him every single day? Just the thought of it made her shudder.

No. She wasn't going to allow that man to ruin this for her. If this job was a good fit, then she had solved her problem within one day.

Bull arrived at Chaos and Carnage Mechanics and was surprised to see Maddie already there. She looked like a school teacher looking all prim and proper. She stood outside the main reception, and Pat stood near one of the cars.

"There a reason she turned up without a car?" Pat asked.

"Yep, there is. I think I solved our reception problem. You might not have to answer phones anymore."

"Fuck me, are we hiring her?" Pat looked way too happy about that.

"You want to hire her?"

"Hell yeah. I'm guessing with her already here, it's a done deal."

"We'll see."

The job was Maddie's if she took it, and not because she featured in all his wet dreams of a late, but because he wanted to give her the job. She'd looked so fucking sad when he walked into the diner. He'd been able to take a seat because she'd been so distracted.

"You made it," he told her.

"Yes, I wanted to get here as soon as I could to let you know that I will work hard."

He raised a brow.

She tilted her head to the side. "I kind of need this job. I don't like not working, you know." She winced. "Not that I'm trying to sound desperate."

“You sound like a woman who needs a job. Don’t stress about it.”

He pulled out his key and unlocked the main reception door. The place stank, and he heard the sound of the sticky floor as his feet stuck to it with each step he took. Grant refused to clean. If he wasn’t such a good mechanic, he would’ve fired him years ago. The little bastard was good with his fingers and seemed to sweet talk the women like there was no tomorrow.

Dust covered every surface, and cobwebs ran from one side of the room to another. It was rare for anyone to be willing to take a seat to wait.

“The place will need cleaning up.” He pushed up the counter and waited for her to enter. Paperwork covered the desk, and a thick layer of dust covered the computer.

Grant didn’t like to use computers. He felt the world was going downhill to nerds. Bull would never understand his brother, but that was one of the many reasons they were so different.

For the next hour, he helped Maddie get settled. He pointed out the invoices, the cars, the keys, the telephone, and he also showed her to the cleaning closet, which to his surprise was immaculate.

“Do you think you can handle this?” he asked. “I’ve got to get working on the cars.”

She nodded. “Yeah, I can handle this. I think. No, I know I can handle this. You can trust me.”

He already did, which was a big fucking surprise to him.

“If you need me, come into the shop, got it.”

“Yes.” She offered him a smile and he nearly fucking melted on the spot. He had never seen Maddie smile for real, and it was so fucking precious. It seemed to light up her whole face.

He wanted to see her smile more often. Her brown eyes seemed to have a twinkle to them.

“Is everything okay?”

“Perfect. I’ll be busy, so yeah, if you need me, don’t hesitate.”

“Already there.”

She moved toward the back and he showed her where they stored their bags and jackets. She looked way too comfortable, and her ass was even more perfect in the skirt, which hugged every single curve.

“With her here, are you going to be able to focus?” Pat asked as he entered the main shop.

“Shut the fuck up,” Bull said.

“Never seen you like this, Prez. Got to wonder.”

“I’m always focused. It’s the job that comes first. You know this.”

Pat sighed.

“What?”

“You ever thought about fucking her and then moving on?” Pat asked.

“Not up for discussion. Not with you or with anyone else.”

Pat shrugged. “You know the guys will test her, right? They’ll want to know if she is even worthy of being with you.”

“They can steer clear.”

“They’ve got your back, Prez.”

“Get to work, Pat. I don’t have time for chitchat.” Bull was very much aware of what the boys were capable of doing, but he wasn’t going to allow them to come to the shop to scare her off.

He hadn’t made any declaration when it came to Maddie French. She was a woman he found attractive. He liked looking at her, and now he’d given her a job. There was nothing more to it.

Glancing back toward the shop, he caught sight of her swatting at something. She flung her arm back and forth, and then stood ramrod straight, closed her eyes, and whispered something.

He smiled.

She opened her eyes, looking right at him.

“Spider,” she said.

“A big one?”

“A massive one.”

“You got it though.”

She nodded. The slight jerk of her head.

He laughed. “I’m sure there are more where that one came from.” He winked at her and pulled his overalls on. With the years spent underneath a car, and oil and grease covering him, he’d lost too many clothes to count. Laundry wasn’t a job he enjoyed doing. The overalls helped.

He went to the first car and tried to ignore the compulsion he had to go and check on Maddie. Every now and then, he’d hear another scream, which made him jerk.

Time passed, and when he heard the vacuum, he didn't pause for a second except to look toward Pat, who shrugged.

By lunchtime, customers started to arrive, but none of them went into the main reception, not that it was a surprise. The place was known to be so damn messy, no one wanted to go there.

He met them near the entrance of the main shop, wiping the grease off his hands.

The first customer was Mr. Riley.

"If you follow me, I'll get your keys and the final cost," Bull said.

Some of the customers were afraid of him and the club, but seeing as he was the best mechanic in town, or for several towns all over, people got over their fear pretty quick. It was also fun to watch them squirm as they tried to figure out if he was running some kind of scam, or a front for drugs and guns.

Like always, he kept them guessing. It was a lot more fun that way.

Stepping into the main reception, he came to a sudden stop. The scent of lemon was heavy in the air, and there was not a speck of dust to be seen.

"Hi," Maddie said.

There was a speck of dust to be seen. Maddie was filthy. The white blouse she wore was gray, with even darker smudge marks where she'd clearly gotten down and dirty.

She looked ... cute.

No, not just cute, sexy as fuck. She was a woman not afraid to get her hands dirty.

"Holy crap," Mr. Riley said.

"As you can see, I've hired help."

Maddie came around the counter and held her hand out as if to shake his, but they were dirty. "Sorry."

"This place is amazing, Maddie," Mr. Riley said. "I had no idea you were working here."

"Mr. Riley, I didn't see you there."

"How many times have I told you to call me George?"

"The van is yours?" Maddie asked.

George nodded.

"You know I thought I recognized it."

“You two know each other?” He didn’t like feeling like a ghost in his own shop.

“Oh, yes, George runs the animal shelter that I volunteer for.”

“I am so sorry that I couldn’t give you a job, Maddie. You know I would do it in a heartbeat.”

“I gave her a job,” Bull said. He didn’t like the way George looked at her, or his familiar way with her.

“You did?”

“Yes. Mr. Reynolds offered me a job this morning. It’s my first day. He gave me permission to clean up the place.”

“It’s looking good.”

“Good old George here has come to pay his bill and pick up his van,” Bull said. He wanted Georgie boy out of his fucking lot.

The man paid on time and was always polite, but right now, Bull wasn’t interested in how reasonable George was.

“Right. Right. Let me get the details.” Maddie went behind the counter, and for the few seconds he caught sight of her ass, George noticed, and Bull saw it all.

He put his hand on George’s arm, and he wanted to crush the little asshole. Maddie wasn’t up for negotiation. George had his chance, and now it was Bull’s turn. She worked for him, and she was going to belong to him. No one was going to get in his way.

Maddie typed into the computer. “Ah, I’ve got everything. Just one second as I print it out.”

The sound of the printer filled the air. George finally looked away from his glare and moved toward the counter.

Maddie turned away and reached up, grabbing the key on the top rung. She couldn’t reach it, and so he moved in close behind her, putting a hand on her hip. He wanted to breathe in the scent of her, but he also didn’t want to scare her off.

He grabbed the keys and turned back to George, who’d gone a little red. Maddie acted like nothing out of the ordinary had happened. This was new to him. He wasn’t used to a woman failing to see his charms, and he didn’t like it.

Maddie got the payment secured, then the bills signed and dealt with, and George went on his merry way.

“How did you find that?” Bull asked.

“Fine. That was ... fun,” Maddie said.

“You have cleaned this place up, but you look a mess. Go and pick us up some lunch. Pat likes anything vegan. Then stop by at home and change,” he said.

“Are you sure? I can stick around.”

“Your clothes will stain, Maddie. Wear something a little more comfortable. I’ve got everything covered here.”

She hesitated but then moved her ass to the main staff room, grabbing her bag. “Do you want anything?”

“A burger with all the trimmings. If you go back to Carl at the diner, he’ll have our order ready.”

“Got it.”

“Get yourself something to eat.”

She chuckled. “I don’t think I need anything after those pancakes.”

“I ate half of them. Don’t forget to eat. I don’t want you fainting on me.”

“Believe me, I won’t starve.” She walked out of the reception, and he watched her go.

“Holy fucking shit balls,” Pat said. “She has worked some magic in here for just a few hours.”

“Yeah.”

“She’s a hard worker,” Pat said. “Should have known it.”

“Why?”

“Have you seen the way she is at the fairs?” Pat asked. “She probably works harder than everyone else, always helping out, covering for people.”

“I don’t want to have any deliveries here,” he said.

“Fine,” Pat said. “I’ll call it in.”

Bull nodded. It was rare to have club stuff come to the shop. He kept the two separate, but there were times they mingled. With Maddie working here now, he was going to make sure the club life didn’t touch her.

Not that he did too much dangerous shit. His father was the one responsible for putting the club in the line of fire and nearly getting them all killed. Bull had the scars to prove the shit he’d done to get out of it. They had their limits, and no one crossed them.

Bull wouldn't allow anything to hit the town, nor would he allow Maddie to know just the kind of person who hired her.

Chapter Three

It didn't take Maddie long to figure out jeans and an old shirt were the best kinds of clothes to wear to work. Two days, exactly. The two white blouses she had worn were not fixable. They were covered in stains, and she had tried detergent, even soaking them, but nothing was going to help clean them.

Instead of tossing them out, she had torn them up into rags, so she would save money that way.

The job at the mechanic shop was fun, for the most part. She was always there at seven. Most of the time, Bull had opened up the shop and was waiting for her. He had to get up super early to be there. She had started going to Carl's to pick up their breakfast. If Bull was getting up early, he deserved the best coffee and breakfast muffins Carnage had to offer.

He rarely said much first thing in the morning. He took the coffee and muffins and stayed in the main shop while she went to the reception desk and checked through the day's bookings. Not only did Bull have regular work from distributors for their cars and trucks, but he also dealt with people turning up or booking ahead of time to have their car checked over.

She was surprised to see what a tight ship he ran. There was no area left for mistakes. He simply didn't accept them. She didn't understand some of the terminology he used when he looked over a car and she had to contact the customer to give them the bad news, but she did so with ease.

He was good at what he did. More than good.

By the end of the week, she had gotten into the flow of the job. She liked Pat, one of the guys who worked with Bull. For the most part, he was quiet, but he didn't make her feel uncomfortable.

A couple of the guys from the Chaos and Carnage MC also worked at the shop. They tended to get to work, ignoring her, and she was more than fine with it. Bull was the person she dealt with most, and he was a good guy. She liked him.

He was fair.

She had seen him help a family out who had been struggling. Two days ago, the dad had come in asking if there was some kind of payment plan. Right in front of her eyes, Bull had changed the invoice details,

removing one of the zeros, and told him that the problems weren't as severe as he first thought.

Bull had paid the difference.

"Well, well, well, I had no idea Chunk was working here."

Maddie looked up, and sure enough, Grant, the one guy she didn't want to see, was standing in the main reception.

A couple of people chuckled at his comment. He often called her Chunk or a fat cow growing up.

She hadn't heard it for a long time. After being stood up the other day, Glenn had called, telling her that he just couldn't bring himself to go on a date with her. She wasn't who he had imagined, and he couldn't get past her weight.

Maddie tensed up. Sickness swirled in her gut as he looked at Grant. She tucked some hair behind her ear.

"I figured you would've gotten a job at a diner, or a bakery, or somewhere there was lots of food."

Tears filled her eyes, but she didn't let them fall. She had learned long ago that Grant only got worse when he knew he was getting to someone. She wasn't going to show him any kind of weakness.

"Mr. Reynolds is in the back," she said.

Grant laughed. "Mr. Reynolds. I bet my brother loves that. So, tell me, Chunk, what have you been up to? I mean, clearly, losing weight wasn't high on your agenda."

If the ground could open her up again and swallow her whole, she would like that.

"Grant, a word. Now," Bull said, suddenly appearing behind her. There was a door to the back of the reception that connected to the main shop. She had uncovered a window, which allowed her to see into the main shop as she worked.

She turned away from the customers who were waiting as she held a file in her hands. Closing her eyes, she counted to ten. Her hands shook, but she didn't want to cry.

Don't cry. Don't cry.

You're not a kid in high school anymore.

Grant's an asshole.

Ignore him.

He was always cruel, manipulative, and evil.

“How long is this going to take?”

She took a deep breath and turned to one of the customers. She didn’t recognize him from town, so he had to have been passing through. “I will go and check.”

Maddie used the door at the back and stepped through to go find Pat. She was careful to not get in anyone’s way.

“Hey, Pat, the out-of-towner is getting a little impatient. Do you have an update?” she asked.

Pat sighed, moving out from under the hood of the car. “It’s fine. He ran out of fucking gas. I put in enough gas to get him to the gas station.”

“Oh.” Maddie frowned.

“You want to know why I waited?” Pat asked.

“He seems pretty mad,” Maddie said.

Pat shrugged. “Let me deal with him.”

“I can handle it.”

“Maddie, guys are assholes. You don’t have to deal with them, and besides, I like irritating pricks.” He winked at her and walked past her, heading back into the shop.

She followed after him but paused when she caught sight of Grant storming past her. He didn’t stop, nor did he push or shove her, but she saw the blood spilling from the corner of his mouth, which she knew hadn’t been there before.

Maddie didn’t stay long as she heard the shouting already happening.

“What an unprofessional, backward, fucking town,” the out-of-towner said, his voice raised.

She stepped in to find Pat with his arms folded, and she already knew that wasn’t a good position for him. It meant that even though he looked calm, he was close to losing it. Bull was usually the one to hold Pat back.

Stepping to Pat’s side, she kept a smile on her face. “Sir, with all due respect, you came in here on fumes. He has saved you a whole heap of work and trouble.”

“Work and trouble. I’ve been waiting for two hours.”

“It would have been a lot longer if you’d kept pushing that car.”

“I ... this is unacceptable,” the out-of-towner said. “I want to talk to the manager of this place.”

“That manager is here,” Bull said.

Maddie glanced back to see him wearing his leather cut. She had never seen him in that at the shop, and seeing it now was a bit of a shock.

“Good. Then you can tell me what the meaning is behind taking your time getting my car ready.”

“Pat?”

“He ran out of gas.”

Bull tutted. “Let me guess, this is one of the scams you usually do?”

She was confused. How could running out of gas be a scam?

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Of course, you don’t. To understand it would mean you have to admit to it. Now, I’m all for causing trouble. If you want to start something, then let’s start it,” Bull said.

The out-of-towner clocked the leather cut, and she watched him swallow. The jacket had impact. Even she was nervous seeing Bull in it. She had been working for him for a week now and she had almost forgotten he was the president of the local MC.

Nerves gripped her.

“Then take your piece-of-shit car and get the fuck out of here.”

The owner grabbed his keys and ran to his car as fast as he could.

“You think it was a scam?” Pat asked.

“Got to be. I think he’s used to causing scenes in order to get a full tank of gas that he doesn’t have to pay for. How much did you fill him up?”

“About five dollars. Enough to get him to the nearest gas station,” Pat said.

“That scam thing is an actual ... thing?” Maddie asked.

“Yep. You’d be surprised how many try it,” Pat said.

“Isn’t that dangerous and stupid? He couldn’t guarantee he’d get here.”

“No one said people were intelligent, babe,” Bull said.

She rolled her eyes. “Don’t call me babe.” She made her way back behind the desk, and she noticed several of the clients had already left, clearly making their exit when Bull came inside wearing his leather cut.

“What’s the matter with you?” Bull asked.

Pat had already gone back into the shop.

“Nothing.”

“You won’t look at me.”

She put down the latest invoice for parts that Bull had asked her to put through, then looked at him. He still wore the jacket.

“I’m fine.”

“You don’t look fine.”

“Do you think you’re the expert of fine?” she asked, smiling at him.

He chuckled. “My jacket unnerves you.”

“It’s fine.”

“You did know who I was,” he said.

“I know.” She nodded. “But I guess, in the last week, I’ve kind of forgotten.”

“Speaking of it being your last week. After your shift, come and see me in my office.” He knocked on the counter. “If you need anything else, you know where to find me.”

He moved past her, and she hated how acutely aware she was of him.

“Oh, and Maddie.”

She glanced behind her.

“If my brother comes in again giving you trouble, let me know. This is a safe place for you to work. You don’t have to put up with his asshole ways.”

She nodded.

“He going to be a problem for you?” he asked.

“No, not unless he intends to pick up what he started back in high school.”

“What did he start?”

She shook her head. “I don’t want to get into it. Can’t we just leave it all in the past where it is meant to be?”

“I’m happy for that, but you don’t have to be uncomfortable around here, got it?” he asked.

“Got it.” She forced a smile to her lips, but it was the last thing she felt like doing.

It looked like Bull wanted to say something else, but he eventually left.

Customers slowly came back and took a seat.

She answered the phones, dealt with customers, handled the ordering, and every now and then, she had no choice but to go out back and to take

down the notes for one of the guys so she could call the people up to talk about their vehicles. Chaos and Carnage Mechanics was a busy place, and she enjoyed the work. Of course, she had no idea what a carburetor or a suspension something or other was. She kind of understood a fuel tank, brakes, and even spark plugs, but everything else just flew over her head.

Still, she was able to tell people who also didn't have a clue what any of it meant what was wrong with their car.

By five o'clock, most of the guys had gone home.

Bull was staying behind for one other customer who didn't finish work until gone five thirty, and had asked if they'd wait. Seeing as she handled the main reception, that was where she was when Bull came to her.

"Any sign of them?" Bull asked.

"None. It's only five thirty-five. I'm sure they'll be here." The car in question was near the front gates. The keys were on the counter, along with the invoice.

Maddie filed the last piece of pricing she'd gotten for a job into a file and placed it in the tray.

"So, we may as well do this here. You've been with us a whole week."

"Yes, I have."

"And?" Bull asked.

"I ... I know I've had a few problems, but I am trying."

She had accidentally ordered a brake light instead of a brake fluid, and had put the job back a day. There had been a few problems along the way, but she was getting there.

"The job is yours, Maddie, if you want to take it."

"It is? Oh, my God, are you for real?"

"Yep. The pay's okay, but I do work Christmas Eve and New Year's."

"I don't mind at all. I will be here. Thank you so much." She wanted to hug him, but instead, she just smiled. "I promise I will get better at everything."

"Don't worry about it. We all make mistakes. You can head out. I'm going to take care of this bit," he said.

"Okay, sure. Sure. No problem." She was on cloud nine. She had a job.

If her mother was still alive, she would have been causing nothing but trouble about who she was working for. Maddie smiled. She liked working for Bull. He wasn't a bad guy at all.

"This is the last shipment here," Bull said.

"Already got the deets of where you want it next time. No problem, my man. I get it. You tell us when and where, and we handle the rest."

Bull held his hand out to his brothers of the coastal chapter who'd run the guns straight from the port to him. This was the deal they had.

The brothers were already loading the guns onto the truck, ready to take them to a secure warehouse that he used as a front for storage. They wouldn't stay too long in his possession.

He'd learned long ago that to keep the law off your back, you had to move shit quickly. Don't allow anyone to get too cozy having shit lying around.

Standing back, he waved the brothers off. Their lights glowed in the distance until they disappeared.

"Sweet is ready," Grant said.

"Then get them moved," Bull said. "Let me know when they've landed."

He stepped back into the main reception, which strangely smelled like his new employee.

Maddie had been so freaking happy to get this job.

"I had no idea you had a thing for Maddie French," Grant said, entering the reception room.

Bud and Rip, who'd been sitting in the waiting chairs, got up and left.

Bull turned toward his brother. "What is it to you?" he asked. "I don't recall ever asking you who you're into."

"That's because I'm into all chicks. You know they want too much of me to give it away."

"I don't have time for this."

"You know she's never going to go for you, don't you?" Grant asked.

Bull stared at his brother. The split lip clearly hadn't affected him. After he heard what Grant was calling Maddie, he'd been so pissed. His brother should consider himself lucky that it was only one punch, not the multiple blows he wished to make. Grant was still his brother and he had

promised him many years ago when they were kids that he would always protect him. There were times though that Grant didn't need protecting. He needed his ass royally kicked.

"I don't recall asking for your opinion."

"Oh, come on. I know this kind of woman. Maddie is a good girl, Bull. She is the kind of girl who has to bring the nice boy home to mommy."

"Then clearly you don't know everything about Maddie, do you?"

"What?"

"Her parents are dead. Have been for some time now. She's all alone. There's no parent for her to idolize."

"Shit, man, that don't change anything."

"I'm done with this conversation with you. When you're here and Maddie is here, you'll treat her with respect, am I understood?" Bull asked.

"You can do so much better than her."

"Am I understood?" He had no choice but to raise his voice as he repeated his question. He hated saying the same thing twice, and it would only ever be Grant who got away with it.

"Fine. I will be nice to her, but don't go holding your breath that she's going to look at you like you're a fucking god."

Grant stormed out of the reception area.

The boys had already started to leave, but as usual, Pat stayed behind and entered the reception desk. "You know you're going through a lot of changes for this woman, Bull."

"Has Grant got you all questioning my motives?"

"Not questioning them, man, just making sure you know what you're doing. The matters of the heart interfere with the head more often than people realize."

"I know what I'm doing." If they became too comfortable with having the shipment in the same place, cops figured it out.

The gun runs were an extension of the deal he made in order to keep Chaos and Carnage out of debt. His and Grant's old man had nearly run the club into the ground. There was no telling what would have happened to it if he hadn't taken over when he had. The club wouldn't have lasted.

His father had been reckless with the club, with the men's lives. He had them into drugs, women, and everything that earned a quick buck, but

could also send them all away for the rest of their lives. Just knowing what their father had done for money sickened Bull.

Grant didn't know the full extent of it either. Not many of the guys did. They knew some of it, and some had an idea, but again, they were happy to be ignorant of the truth.

He rubbed at his temples. He didn't have the first clue what he was doing with Maddie.

Seeing her at the diner with the pancakes that had become a signature for Carl after Valentine's Day, he knew he had to help her.

It made no sense. They weren't together. They had spoken more in the past week than before he offered her the job. She wasn't his responsibility and yet, he'd been unable to walk away from her.

"I'm heading back to the clubhouse," Pat said. "My *not* sleep won't happen by itself."

Bull burst out laughing.

Pat never slept well. The guy tried to, but he'd long given up the notion of sleeping well, so his new normal was bad sleep.

Closing up the reception office and the shop, he then made his way toward the main gate and locked it up.

Tomorrow was Sunday. He didn't get a chance to see Maddie on a Sunday, and he didn't like how fucking alone that made him feel.

He climbed onto his bike, turned over the ignition, and began riding. He drove out of Carnage, taking the road that was clear of most cars. Needing the open road to clear his mind, he kept on going. The guns were a big problem. They were the least of two evils. The never-ending debt that kept his men alive.

All his life, he'd been able to fight his battles. From a young age, he'd defended himself, fought for what he believed in, took on every single challenge he faced, and came out the victor. It went against his nature to give in, to submit.

The only reason they ran guns was to keep the club alive.

He took a deep breath and brought his bike to a stop.

"You know, son, you are going to be a big strapping boy like me."

"I want to be like you when I grow up, Daddy."

"You will, son. You will."

The memory of riding a small bike outside of the clubhouse filled Bull's head. It was such a long time ago. He'd gotten the title Bull long before he became a fully patched-in member of the Chaos and Carnage.

From the women who used to look after them, to the teachers who tried to tame him, and then of course his father attempting to mold him, they had all said he was stubborn as a bull. He was unmovable, but the moment anyone messed with him, all bets were off.

The beast hadn't come out of the cage in a long time.

Bull turned the bike around and headed back to town. He didn't bother with the clubhouse, and instead went to the only other place he called home.

He turned the ignition off the bike as Thomas's front door opened. Bull smiled as he heard the childish squeal and out came two young children. Henry and Mary. Thomas's wife, Rebecca, had a thing about Tudor England.

Bull picked up both kids. Mary was the youngest at only three years old. Henry was seven and growing way too fast.

"What are you heathens doing being up so late?" he asked.

"Uncle Bull, I lost a tooth, look," Henry said, smiling.

"Wow, look at that big gap. I can see right down to your stomach. You had something healthy for dinner, didn't you?"

Mary chuckled, cupping her face as she did.

"I know that chuckle. Tell me your mom didn't feed you crap."

Thomas chuckled, but Rebecca came to the door laughing. "Enough, Bull. You will corrupt them. You know I don't mind feeding them pizza on a Saturday night."

"You want some, Uncle Bull?" Mary asked.

"I would love some."

"Come on, kids. Go and finish your movie and give Uncle Bull some space," Rebecca said.

He carried them back to the house, putting them down on the floor. After kissing Rebecca's cheek, he shook Thomas's hand.

Thomas patted him on the back. "Come on, let's feed you."

He closed the door and followed his friend into the kitchen. "You were expecting me?" Bull asked, taking a seat at the table.

“You can call it divine intuition, or some of the locals were talking about your new receptionist at the garage.”

“It’s a mechanic shop, dude,” Bull said.

Thomas pulled the pizza out of the oven, slid a few slices onto a plate, and handed it to him.

“It’s a garage. No matter what fancy term you want to dress it up by.”

Bull wasn’t going to argue. He took a bite and closed his eyes. “Good pizza.”

“Roy’s place is, and you know it. So are you going to tell me why you got the French girl to work for you?”

“She needed a job.”

“Yeah, and Elizabeth had a whole lot to say about you being pissed that her date had left her high and dry,” Thomas said.

“Yeah, I was going to ask you about that. How many times has that happened?” Bull asked.

“Ah, so you haven’t come here for thrilling conversation,” Thomas said. He took a seat, looking way too smug.

“Don’t do that,” Bull said.

“Do what?”

“Look like you know more about something than I do.” He pointed between them. “That’s not what is going on here.”

“It’s not?”

“No.”

“Ah, you could have fooled me.”

Bull rolled his eyes.

“You want to know more about Maddie French, don’t you?”

“I don’t need to know anything more.”

“But seeing as I’m the only one you trust in this whole wide world, and I have eyes and ears everywhere, you want to know more,” Thomas said.

“You’re loving this, aren’t you?”

“Who wouldn’t?” Thomas laughed.

“And for the record, you don’t have eyes and ears everywhere.”

“Actually,” Thomas said, leaning forward. “That is where you’re wrong, my good man. I don’t have to pay anyone. The townsfolk are all

gossips. You know how it goes. They see someone, who has seen someone, who knows something, and it just has to be true.”

“That’s giving me a headache,” Bull said.

“Seeing as this is a new experience for me, I’m not going to make you pay up in any way at all. There’s not much to go on. Maddie has come to the bar a few times for drinks. She sometimes sits in the main restaurant area and has given a few details of the person she is waiting for.”

“And they don’t show?”

“Some do, some don’t. Most of the time, she looked miserable. The dating game hasn’t been kind to her. What I know about her as a person is that she’s sweet. Not many friends. Tends to volunteer a lot. Most people use her for help, that kind of thing.”

“That’s not a lot to go on,” he said.

“When is there ever anything to go on?” Thomas asked. “Are you thinking of dating her?”

“I’m forty-two years old. I don’t date.”

“Then you’ve got to do something. Otherwise, you’re going to die a lonely old man with nothing and no one but me.”

“Now that’s a scary thought.”

Chapter Four

Monday morning couldn't have come soon enough for Maddie. Even as she tried to focus on work, at random times, tears would fill her eyes, and she would remember that sweet dog that didn't have the best start in life.

It was a slow day. The first one in over a week. She had thought there was no such thing as a slow day.

"Hey, Maddie, I need you to call parts again and tell them I'm still waiting for my brake light," Bull said, coming into the shop.

She had let tears fall.

"Yes." Her voice croaked. She cleared her throat, wiped at her eyes, and answered him. "Yes, of course." She turned toward him, reaching for the details, but he wouldn't let go of the sheet of paper.

"What's going on?" he asked.

"Nothing."

"That face doesn't look like nothing."

She smiled, but it didn't reach her eyes. There was no compulsion to smile. "It's nothing. Can I just have the paperwork so I can chase this delivery for you? I know it's important."

"You can as soon as you tell me what is going on."

Maddie dropped her hand. "It's nothing. Honestly."

"Has someone upset you?"

"No."

"So they're happy tears?"

"Bull, Mr. Reynolds, please, let me do my job."

"Then tell me."

She sighed.

He wasn't going to budge, and she was too damn miserable to fight him. She licked her lips. "You know how I ... er ... volunteer at the animal shelter?"

He nodded.

"Yesterday, there was a ... some dogs that had been acquired or taken, or I don't know, it doesn't matter. They ended up at the animal shelter, and this one little girl. She wasn't any older than two, couldn't be, she ... she had been in such a bad way." She looked at Bull and saw him frowning.

“Dogfights. You know, the illegal kind where people bet on dogs fighting each other until they kill each other. It’s so awful. This girl, I could see that she just wanted to be loved. That was all she wanted, and the vet came and told us that she wasn’t going to make it. I held her as she died in my arms.”

Maddie stopped, pressed her lips together, and took a deep breath. “Sorry. I know I shouldn’t be bringing this kind of thing into work, but I can’t get her out of my head. Why would people do such a thing?” Her throat felt like it was on fire.

Bull put the piece of paper down, wrapped his arms around her, and pulled her in close. “I’ve got you,” he said. “Just cry it out.”

“I don’t want to cry.” The tears were already falling thick and fast. “It was so horrible. She was covered in blood and it looked like they were starving her.” She sobbed. “Why? Why do they do it?”

“Because the world is full of evil bastards who take pleasure in sick and twisted games.” Bull began to stroke her hair. His touch helped to soothe her.

The tears fell hard, but after some time, and with her face pressed against his chest, she was able to calm down. To bring herself back into some kind of control. She took a breath and leaned back.

“Thank you. I’m so sorry. I shouldn’t have cried like that.”

“You care about the pets at the animal shelter, don’t you?” he asked.

“Someone has to. They’re good ... pets. Sorry, I don’t see them as pets, I guess.” She shrugged. “This is why I shouldn’t volunteer, but I love those guys. I’d adopt them all if I could.”

“Do you have any pets?”

“Not allowed. Building rules.” She shrugged. It sucked, but she hadn’t broken any of the rules to get a dog or a cat, even though she had really wanted to.

She reached for some tissues and quickly blew her nose. “I will phone this order for you and handle it.”

“Did the cops bring the dogs to you?” Bull asked.

She shook her head. “No. They had been dumped along the road. The dogfighting thing is still going strong. They have no idea where it is.”

Bull nodded. “If you need to talk or if you want to take some time, let me know.”

"I will. I was hoping to come in today to just work, you know? It helps me when there is bad news to just dive in and work through it. It's how I cope with things." She picked up the piece of paper and saw the number along the top.

Bull lingered, and she forced a smile to her lips. She couldn't believe she had unloaded all of that onto her boss. There was a high chance he was going to fire her.

The rest of the day was uneventful. Not many breakdowns. A few people came to pick up their cars.

Pat left early.

She and Bull stayed until five when he decided to close up shop.

They both stood outside of the gate as he locked it.

"I wanted to say thank you for earlier. I ... I didn't even realize I'd been holding it in, but then it just ... came out."

"Shit like that happens." He flicked the keys between his fingers.

"I don't cry over everything, I promise," she said, laughing.

"You can cry any time, Maddie. I'm not going to hold it against you." He glanced past her shoulder. "Do you want to go and grab a cup of coffee?"

"Er, yeah, sure, I'd like that." This wasn't weird, was it? It wasn't a date or anything other than having coffee with the boss.

Bull shoved the keys into his jacket pocket, and they walked side by side, in silence.

Maddie couldn't believe she was walking with Bull. Of all the men to be heading to the diner with, Bull was the last person she imagined.

"I wanted to say sorry about your loss," he said.

"About the dog?"

"No, er, about your parents."

"Oh," she said. "Right, yes, they passed some time ago."

"I never went to the funeral."

She had to attempt to contain her laughter. "It's fine. Not a lot of people turned up."

It was her, the priest, and the two men who were going to bury her parents. At her dad's it was her mother, and at her mother's funeral, it was just her.

"Did you know my parents?" she asked.

“No, I can’t say that I did.”

She wasn’t going to tell him her mother would have found it an insult for him to go to her funeral. She could imagine her mother being ungrateful even in death.

Maddie chuckled. She just couldn’t help it. The very thought of this man going would have sent her mother turning in her grave.

“What’s the matter?” he asked.

“Oh, it’s nothing. Let me just say that my mother wasn’t always a nice person.” That was being nice about her.

“That, I get.”

“What about you?” she asked. “And your parents? Unless that is crossing a line.” The last thing she wanted to do was talk about herself. It felt safer to let him talk about his life.

“Not much to tell. Never knew my mother, and my dad passed some time ago.”

“He was alive though when Grant was still in school, right?”

“Yeah, he was. Why?”

“I don’t know. I think I would have remembered if he wasn’t.”

“I am sorry about Grant,” Bull said.

She glanced over at him and shrugged. “You don’t need to apologize for him.”

“My brother is an asshole.”

This made her smile. “I know.”

He chuckled.

They entered the diner together, and Maddie glanced over the crowd. Some of them instantly leaned forward and began whispering to each other.

Bull grabbed her hand, and at first, she tensed up at the contact. It was so strange to be touched by him, by anyone. Her parents hadn’t been the kind to share feelings like that. He held out a seat, and she sat down.

He let go of her hand, and she immediately placed it on her thigh, but Bull wasn’t done. He pushed her chair forward with ease and she slid closer to the table. His face was so close to her hair, and she couldn’t help but be aware of him at her back.

Get it together, Maddie.

Bull sat opposite her, and he removed his leather cut. He wore a plain white t-shirt that left most of his arms exposed, showing off the ink that

decorated his skin. She rarely saw his ink while they were working. The overalls he wore covered him from ankle to cuff.

“Do you like them?” he asked, holding out his arms.

“Er, they’re ... a lot.”

“You don’t like that?”

“I didn’t say that. I think you’re very brave having them. I couldn’t imagine having a tattoo. Does it hurt?” She wanted to cringe at her topic of conversation. Was this another reason men never wanted to go out with her?

“Sometimes, but I’ve grown used to certain levels of pain.” He grabbed a menu and she took the other.

Glancing over the food, she had no idea what to pick. She was so hungry, but if she ordered too much, would he judge her? This was so embarrassing.

Beatrice came out with a smile.

“Well, well, well, I’m so glad to finally see you two back in my office,” Beatrice said and winked at her.

Heat began to build up in her face.

“What can I get you?” Beatrice asked.

“I’ll have the special, please. You know how I like it,” Bull said.

She immediately put the menu down. “I’ll have the same as him.”

Beatrice wrote on her notepad, took their drink orders, and left.

“How was your date the other night?” Bull asked.

“Huh?”

“The no-show?”

“Oh, yeah, it wasn’t going to work out,” Maddie said. “I’m done with the whole internet dating.”

“Did the guy give a reason?”

She nodded. “Not one I want to share.” She wasn’t about to tell her boss that her date had decided her size was a problem and he didn’t think she was pretty enough. He said he wasn’t going to fuck her by the end of the night, so he figured there was no point in wasting either of their time.

Maddie hated that he assumed she wanted to get laid. There was more to life than sex. It probably didn’t help that the one and only time she had ever had sex was on her prom night with her date. The pity fuck.

Just the memory was enough to make her cringe.

Bull kept staring at her, and she felt this overwhelming need to check to make sure she hadn't gotten anything stuck between her teeth.

"So, er, how is everything with you?" she asked.

"You haven't been on many dates, have you?"

"Is this a date? I thought we were just ... you know, er, having some food as colleagues."

"We are, but I've got kind of a proposition for you."

Two days later

"Do you want to tell me again why we're doing this?" Grant asked.

Bull ignored his brother's annoying question. He didn't need to tell anyone anything.

Lifting Pat's military-grade binoculars, he saw all the kennels. It sickened him.

The club had never invested in dogfighting. For all of his father's piece-of-shit ways and desire to earn quick money, the bastard had loved animals. Had even owned many dogs. It was one of the things he was known for, taking in strays, of any breed, even if it was a mongrel.

Bull, himself, had always loved dogs and cats.

"Bull, people are pieces of shit. They are not worth your time. They will stab you in the back, but dogs, man, dogs are better than everyone. They are loyal, grateful, and will never turn on you."

The memory of his father's words haunted him. Taking a deep breath, he moved the binoculars across the compound, and seeing the pile of dead bodies was enough to make him sick.

After seeing Maddie crying because of a deceased animal, he had made it his mission to find the local dogfighting ring to put an end to it.

He had no idea one was in Carnage. It was far out on the outskirts of town. They were near an obscure farm that had been abandoned many years ago. No one came by to check on any activity, and there was a shit load of it. Kennels lined the walls, and there were so many dogs. Some of them were cowering in the kennels as men passed. They had come to fear them.

He lowered the binoculars and handed them back to Pat.

"When did I have to tell you my reasoning for doing anything?"

"You've never cared about any of the shit that's going on in our backyard."

"I care about this, or did you forget what Dad taught us?" he asked.

"Dad is dead, and the last time I checked, he wasn't exactly high on the whole moral compass thing."

He couldn't argue that point.

Their dad was a piece of shit, but that didn't stop him from having good points, and Bull refused to ignore the good the man had done for them both.

"What's the plan?" Pat asked.

Rusty, Sweet, Rip, and Bud were all happy to come and check out the dogfighting ring. Most of them were dog lovers themselves.

The only one who was being a little pussy was his brother. It might have something to do with Bull disturbing him mid-fuck, but he didn't care. His brother needed to learn to keep it in his pants, and seeing he was happy calling Maddie names and making her life miserable, Bull was more than happy to make his life just as bad.

"I go in," Bull said. "I'm going to want to talk to the guy running the shop. Once I do, I will give you guys the signal."

"Are we keeping them alive?" Rusty asked.

The brother sounded bloodthirsty, and Bull wasn't going to deny him.

As far as Bull was concerned, the bastards who had set this up deserved to die. All he saw was Maddie's tears. How upset she had been, and he'd been there. Losing a dog you loved was the hardest thing in the fucking world.

It was the only time his dad had allowed him to mourn, otherwise, his sons were never allowed to show pain or weakness. Tears were a weakness. Thinking about it now, Bull couldn't help but think of ironic it was.

"I've told Dylan about what's happening, and he isn't happy. Anyone who dies, I don't think will be mourned, but those who live, we're going to make sure has an even worse time of it in prison."

They had boys in lockup, and Bull paid a fortune to keep them protected.

"Let's do this," Rusty said.

Bull shook his brothers' hands, but Grant ignored him. They were eventually going to have to talk about whatever was up his brother's ass.

He walked toward the main gates. This operation was so sloppy, or they'd gotten complacent. Bull stepped right into the thick of it.

The dogs looked at him with interest.

Don't worry, boys and girls, you will not have to fight another day.

"Hey!"

The shout came from the right.

He hated being shouted at. With hands in his pockets, he turned to the growl and saw a man coming toward him, looking less than impressed.

Well, he was pissed off just as much.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" the man asked. He had a bald spot on his head, but the rest of his hair was intact and long. Bull didn't get it. "I'm here to see a man in charge."

"Not interested," he said.

"He will be when he knows I've got a pack of dogs. They've been trained to kill. Teeth are sharpened. Killed a few men that way as well." He was talking shit. The dogs back at the clubhouse, the ones that lived with him, they were so fucking lazy unless they thought the club was being threatened.

Most of their days were spent either in the yard sunbathing, begging in the kitchen, or lazing it around in the shade. They had rather luxurious lives, and they were probably the closest thing he'd come to in the way of kids.

"How did you find us?" the man asked, pointing his gun all over the place. He didn't look quite all there in the head.

"It wasn't hard to find." He'd asked Pat to get him all the necessary intel.

The man got closer and closer. He shook, and with each step he took, Bull saw the man was on drugs. Now this pissed him off even more.

He knew what drugs of any kind did to a person. How it turned them into a shadow of their former self and what they never would do before the drugs became null and void. He had seen fine, law-abiding women offer their bodies, beg to the point it was sickening for another shot.

Drugs disgusted Bull just as much as dogfighting.

His father had ended up trying his own product. The greed had set in not too long after that. Bull hated the memories of that time so fucking much.

When the man was close enough, Bull reacted. He grabbed him around the neck and slammed him up against his chest, holding him so

close, and he wasn't a match to him.

The gun was next, he pressed it to the man's head.

"Now tell me, boy, what is your name?"

"You let me go, you hear? You let me go or it's going to be your life next. We feed assholes like you to the dogs."

The urge to pull the trigger was so strong.

With the commotion, two more men came out, and then the third. Now this did surprise him as a man in a suit walked out, and Bull just knew this man owned the place.

His men would already be reacting.

"Marshall, man, get him to stop."

"For fuck's sake, Billy," Marshall said, shaking his head. "Make him stop. I know you can."

"Well, Marshall, it looks like I found my man," Bull said.

The two men drew their guns, and never one to like being threatened, Bull fired his weapon, taking out the kneecaps of both men. Marshall jumped back.

Billy started to cry, and Bull hit him hard across the head.

"You have no idea what you're doing," Marshall said.

"I think I do." He pocketed the gun and brought out both of his that had been placed in the back of his jeans.

In the old cowboy movies, he had always thought it looked cool when the hero took the villains by surprise and drew out two guns as opposed to one. Of course, it helped that he'd been ambidextrous his whole life and it didn't take any training for him to draw both weapons.

Marshall took a step back. "Look, I recognize your cut, your club, and I am warning you, you do not want to do this."

"Do I look like I give a fuck?" Bull asked.

His men had already joined him. They were at his back.

Marshall was surrounded and outnumbered as he shook his head.

"Who are you?"

"I'm someone who will make your life miserable if you kill me."

His boys began to chuckle, but Marshall merely smirked. "Your death will cause me trouble. Is that what you're trying to tell me?"

Marshall shrugged.

"Why the dogs?" Bull asked.

“Why not?”

He didn’t like this guy.

“Oh, I get it, you’re an animal lover. Let me guess, they’re your best friends. These dogs are nothing more than pieces of meat. They make an income, and when they lose, they die.”

Bull had heard enough. He fired the gun, and like his buddies, Marshall was on the floor, whirling in pain. Stepping over the men, Bull reached into the man’s pocket and grabbed his wallet, tossing it over to Pat, who pocketed it.

“I never liked anyone who abused dogs. I wonder, if they are so well trained, will they let you boys live?” Bull asked.

The chances of the dogs attacking these men were slim. To get them to cooperate, they would have had to use violence and fear tactics to get them compliant. The more he thought about what they did, he wanted to kill them.

Instead, as he went past each cage with the hammer he found just lying on the ground, he began to smash the locks. He put a call through to Dylan.

His boys were there, helping the dogs.

There had to have been easily fifty dogs. The dogs didn’t attack the men. They instead went to his boys, the ones who were offering a chance, a new hope.

“You’re making a big mistake,” Marshall said.

“Maybe I am, but I don’t give a fuck. You want to do shit like this on my land, you come to me. I own Carnage. Do you understand?” Bull asked.

He wanted to slam the hammer into the guy’s forehead, but that wouldn’t help his cause. Dylan would have to do an investigation, and it would become sticky. After he’d cleaned up his father’s last mess, he vowed he wouldn’t succumb to the violence. He would learn to find another way, but he was so close to backing out on his promise to himself.

Dropping the hammer to the floor, he stepped back.

Hands clenched at his sides, he took several deep breaths, and then, with one of the limping dogs who had come to him, he walked away. The boys had brought the van close. He was driving with Pat because being alone with his brother would annoy the fuck out of him.

Grant wasn’t on board with what he was doing.

He lifted the wounded dog into the back of the truck and moved around to the front, climbing into the passenger side.

“Give me the guy’s wallet,” he said.

Pat handed it over, and he flipped through it.

“Marshall Smith. Do you recognize the name?” Bull asked.

“Never heard of him. But do you think it is an alias?” Pat asked.

“Not a clue.” He tossed the wallet onto the seat beside him.

“What’s going on, Prez?” Pat asked.

He wasn’t about to tell his man that he had a feeling he’d started something he never intended to do.

“You did this for Maddie, didn’t you?” Pat asked.

“Not just for Maddie,” he said. “I hate anyone who thinks it’s a good thing to hurt dogs.”

Chapter Five

Maddie stood in the room, a little shocked by what Bull had told her.

"We can't take all of the dogs," George said.

From the moment the Chaos and Carnage MC had turned up with fifty dogs, he'd been a little less than savory.

Maddie ran her fingers through the cutey pie's fur. Bull had brought this dog straight to them. The dog was a boy, and it looked like one of his legs was crushed. The vet had already been by to see him, and he was currently taking a call. Then they were going to plan the treatment.

"You're so beautiful," Maddie said.

The dog nuzzled her wrist, and she smiled.

"We can take the injured and as many as we can, right?" Maddie said.

"We could set up an adoption date."

"They are going to have to be investigated," George said.

"Why?"

"They're vicious dogs."

She shook her head. "Only because they had to be."

"Yeah, but there is a chance they could have harmed humans, and that's not allowed."

"What makes you think they harmed humans?" Bull asked.

The room had been tense the moment both of these men stepped into the room. She had no idea what was going on, and it kind of worried her a little bit. Bull looked at George as if he was some kind of bug.

"They're covered in blood. You said you found them at a dogfighting ring, and we don't know what goes on there," George said.

"We can do our best to help, right?" Maddie said. "We can't turn these fur babies away." She pressed her face against the dog, and he nuzzled her face.

George put a hand on her shoulder and gave it a squeeze. "Of course. We will do all that we can."

The vet returned, and in his hand were some scans. "This guy is going to need an operation. I'm going to need to reset the bones, but he's pretty young. I want to do some tests to see how he will handle the anesthesia."

Maddie left the details to George. They decided on tomorrow, and she turned to Bull. "Can I leave early to come and see how he is doing?"

“Of course. I will come with you. I want to know how all these guys are doing.”

“For now, he is going to need some rest, and I will check on some of the other dogs.”

George went to pick him up, but Bull got there first.

“I’ll take you to his room,” Maddie said, leaving the vet clinic. She held open the doors. “You like dogs?”

“Love them. Even my dad loved them when he was around.”

“They’re amazing.”

“That they are,” he said in agreement.

She walked him down the long corridor. Seeing as the dog was going to be in surgery in the morning, he stayed close to the vet clinic. She smiled at a few nurses she passed, but they were more interested in Bull.

After opening the door, they went to a bed in the corner that had a water bowl. She wanted to give him some food, but the vet would organize what to feed him.

Bull lowered him down onto the bed.

“He’s so sweet,” Maddie said. “I hate that anyone could do this.”

“While we let him get some rest, do you want to see the other dogs?” Bull asked.

Maddie nodded. “I’ll be back. I promise.” She wasn’t going to get much sleep tonight worrying about this little guy. If she could have, she’d have taken him home.

With a sigh, she got to her feet and left the main clinic. The sound of barking dogs filled the air.

They were an animal shelter primarily for dogs and cats, but they sometimes took in rabbits, hamsters, and any kind of animal that was often dumped on their front lawn.

“I can’t believe you stumbled onto the dogfighting ring,” Maddie said. “Were you afraid?”

“It takes a lot to make me afraid, Maddie.”

“Of course, it does.” This was awkward. She couldn’t stop thinking about Bull’s proposition last night.

She had done nothing but think about it all day, and if the animals at the shelter could talk to humans, they would have a whole lot to say to Bull about what she’d been talking about.

"We are but I've got kind of a proposition for you."

"What kind of proposition?"

"I can already tell you struggle when it comes to dating, so I'm offering my services."

"I still don't get it," she said.

"I am going to show you how to date."

"You're propositioning to teach me to date?" she asked.

He smiled. "Yes, and in return, you have to promise to keep this between us."

"You're going to teach me in secret?"

"Exactly."

Their conversation had been weird. She spent a lot of time last night thinking about it as well.

She wasn't good on dates or with men, and Bull was now offering her the chance to learn from him.

"Have you thought about what I asked last night?" Bull asked.

Maddie licked her lips. Her mouth felt incredibly dry. "I have."

"And?"

"I ... what will dating entail?" she asked.

"Well, I will teach you how not to be awkward around men. I'm getting the sense you're not used to it, and seeing as I'm a man, I know what I'm talking about."

This did make her laugh. "You have a point."

"There's no reason to be nervous."

"I don't think every thirty-year-old woman is offered dating advice, or even the opportunity to practice." She shrugged. "I don't know. It sounds kind of corny."

"How many dates have you been on?" he asked.

"The ones that turn up, quite a few." She was mortified by her answer. "Look, I appreciate what you're offering, I am, but I don't know. The point of dating is for the guy to want to be there, Bull. The last time..." She gritted her teeth. She hadn't wanted to tell him what was going on, but seeing as he was kind of being sweet and attempting to offer her sound advice, she had to be honest with him. "The last date that was a no-show. He didn't want to have sex with me at the end of the night." She held her hands up in total surrender and mortification. If she told him that, she might

as well go the whole mile. “He told me I was too fat and too ugly, and that even though he wanted to get laid, I was going to be too much hard work to get through. There, that’s just him for now, but believe me, this isn’t the first time I’ve been told that.” She tucked her hair behind her ears, feeling even worse than she had moments ago. “So I don’t think I need dating advice. What I need is a strict diet and plastic surgery.”

“No, you don’t,” Bull said.

“Look, I don’t...” She stopped talking as she came to one of the kennels and frowned. The paperwork was attached to the door, and she picked up the file to glance through it.

“What is it?”

“I ... I’m sure I recognize this dog,” Maddie said. “She came in last year. She was a stray, but she was rehomed.”

If she was rehomed, there would be a file attached, but there was nothing to it. The dog sat in the corner, wagging her tail, and Maddie frowned. “I must be wrong.” Even though she was doing everything the previous dog had done.

She turned toward Bull, aware of him watching her. “I’m sorry, I need to check on something.” Maddie made her way toward the main reception where they kept files on all their rehomed animals.

“You’re not ugly or fat,” Bull said.

This made her turn toward him, a little shocked about what he was saying. “You don’t need to say that. I’m a big girl, I know the truth.”

“Then clearly people have been lying to you, Maddie, because when I look at you, I don’t see an ugly, fat woman.” He took a step toward her. “I see a very sexy, very desirable woman, and any man she looked at should consider himself grateful.”

She couldn’t believe what was happening when he wrapped his arm around her waist and pulled her in close. His lips were a mere breath away. All it would take was an inch of movement, and then he’d be kissing her, but Maddie froze still, shocked by his actions, unsure what to do.

He was so close.

His rock-hard body was against hers. She knew he was a muscular man, had seen them from a distance in the shop as he unloaded deliveries, but this was new. He held her with those muscles.

Heat flooded her body.

“And I wasn’t offering you dating advice to help you. I was using it as an excuse to get you to myself.”

She stared into his green eyes and had to wonder if she was sleeping. Dreams were strange places and they made people do weird things.

Her mouth was so dry. She tried to ignore what his touch was doing to her, but as he held her tightly, it was hard to ignore.

Maddie opened her mouth, closed it. No sound came out.

“Prez, you got a minute?” Pat asked.

She glanced over at Pat, feeling a little grateful for the reprieve.

Bull slowly let her go, and he looked a little annoyed with the way his brows drew together and the slight pinch of his lips.

Maddie made her escape, going to the main reception.

Hellen, one of the other volunteers, was at the front desk, doing a crossword puzzle.

“Hey, Hellen, where do we keep the rehoming files?” she asked.

“They’re in the back. You’ll see it. It’s labeled.”

“Thanks.”

Disappearing into the back room, Maddie switched on the light and glanced through the cabinets. They were all labeled, and as she came to the rehoming section, she saw they were also categorized by date. She found the ones for last year and started to look through all the details, coming to the one she remembered.

They had named the dog Rose, seeing as she liked to lie out near some of the rose bushes.

Opening the file, Maddie saw the picture of the dog, but there was no other information in the file. She closed it, pushed the cabinet shut, and walked back out to Hellen, but she wasn’t alone. Bull was there.

She had no idea what she was doing when it came to him. Never in her life had she been teased or desired and yet, according to Bull, he wanted her. Or did he?

Shaking off her confusion, she went to Hellen. “One of the dogs at the fighting ring, we had her before. It’s Rose.”

“What?” Hellen got to her feet, taking the file from her.

“What’s going on?” Bull asked.

“We document all adoptions for the safety of the animals. There are times that people try to adopt an animal and they’re not doing it out of the

goodness of their hearts.”

“Rose is back?” Hellen asked.

Hellen had been in the process of trying to adopt her herself, but George had made her jump through all the necessary channels until one day, they had come in to find Rose was gone. George said a family had taken the dog, and that they’d been in the process of doing it for days.

Maddie hadn’t questioned it, but Hellen had been distraught. They all felt a connection to these dogs, but it was one of the reasons Hellen stopped going into the main kennel. After Rose, she had decided she got too attached and needed to take space.

Hellen asked where Rose was, and Maddie told her.

“What is it?” Bull asked.

She gripped her shoulders and looked back out the door that led to the kennels. “I’m wondering how many of the dogs you brought here were originally taken.”

This wasn’t going to end well. Maddie knew the only person who could allow any of the dogs to be taken was George.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Rusty asked, grabbing a chair, spinning it around, and straddling it.

Bull looked up from his beer at his brother. The kennel had taken twenty dogs, leaving him with thirty to house.

Seeing as most of the boys loved dogs, it hadn’t taken them all that long to agree to find a nice space and to start the process of turning it into a kennel. He couldn’t get Maddie out of his mind, not that he wanted to. He’d laid it out pretty fucking clear for her.

When he’d offered her the chance to take dating advice for him, he had cursed himself for being such a fucking pussy. Maddie wasn’t like the women he knew around the club or out of it.

Even with his scar, he was used to women throwing themselves at him. The patch had a lot to answer for, and it helped get him laid. Of course, he didn’t stick his dick in any of the club pussy, and hadn’t for a very long time. Rusty being his case in point, in spreading all kinds of infections and diseases. He had ordered all his men to bag their dicks, and they had complained at the time.

“Talk about what?”

“The dogs. Maddie. Any of it.”

“Last time I checked, you weren’t a trained psychologist,” Bull said. “I’m not going to be telling you jack shit.”

“You break my heart. As the brother that gets most of the pussy around here, I know when I see a guy chasing it. You’re chasing Maddie’s pussy.”

“Watch it.”

“Look, brother, you’re old, but you clearly don’t know how to go chasing what you want.”

“I’m not going to take dating advice from a brother who thinks getting crabs is a weekend of fun.”

Rusty sighed. “When are you going to let me live that down?”

“You’re not, ever. It’s gross.”

“I had no idea the chick was infected.”

“There’s a chance you gave her the crabs that infected the club.”

Rusty groaned. “You’re just making me sound bad now, and I don’t like that. I can help you with Maddie. Believe me, I know the way into every woman’s pants, and, Prez, you haven’t exactly been a very nice guy the past few days.”

“I’ve been organizing kennels, Rusty. I’ve been busy. I don’t have time to play games with you.”

“I’m not playing games, but it’s true what they say about all fun and games make everyone dull people.”

“You’re making that up,” he said.

“Am not. I know what I’m talking about.”

Bull glanced over Rusty’s shoulder and was surprised to see Maddie at the front gate of the clubhouse.

He got to his feet.

“Dude, I’m talking with you here,” Rusty said.

“And I’ve got shit to do.”

He went up to the gates to where Maddie was waiting. It had been a couple of days since he last saw her. Monday was the last day when she’d been worried about the dog going into surgery. The dog had made it. She went to the animal shelter every single night after work.

“What are you doing here?” he asked.

"I'm sorry. Should I go? Is now a bad time?" She looked behind him, and he turned to see a couple of the scantily clad club women smoking and laughing.

"No, I don't mind you being here at all. It's not really your scene."

She smiled. "Not a lot is my scene. I wanted to talk to you ... about something." She nibbled on her lip. "I didn't know where to go and you brought the dogs in."

"It's about the dogs?"

"Yes."

"Then follow me." He walked toward the clubhouse, and he glanced toward Rusty, who gave him two thumbs up.

He was going to kill that bastard when he had the chance. Leading the way through the main room, he went to his office, holding open the door.

"What is it about the dogs?" he asked.

"It's not about the dogs," Maddie said. "I ... er, this is so hard. So, after Rose, you know the dog that I had recognized?"

He nodded and took a seat. Pat was still looking into Marshall Smith of the dogfighting ring, and like he figured, the man didn't exist. Pat was using some of his contacts in the military to attempt to get a face recognition or anything on the guy.

So far, other than costing him a fortune in land and the kennels, the dogs hadn't come with a problem, but he knew that wasn't going to last. His gut told him so.

Maddie sat forward.

"I checked over all the dogs. We have at least five that were rehomed within the last year, but their files are empty. I know you took the dogs to a kennel close by. I was wondering if I could perhaps look over them and see if I recognize any of them."

Bull put his arms on the desk and looked her in the eye. "What are you telling me here, Maddie? I get the sense you don't need to go looking through thirty more dogs to see if you can find ones that came from your animal shelter."

Maddie crossed her arms over her chest, pressed her lips together, and shook her head. "I ... I don't know."

"Yeah, you do."

She nibbled on her lip. "I think ... no, I know George had to have given those dogs away. Hellen wanted Rose, okay? Then overnight, the dog miraculously is rehomed and we never saw anyone come to see Rose. Hellen was the only one who cared. I never thought about it because I was always a volunteer, but I started to ask around, and they don't recall any family coming. All of the dogs I found, their rehoming files are empty." She sat back. "I don't know what to do."

"Have you confronted Georgie with this information?"

"No. Just me, Hellen, and now you know about this."

"Hellen knows."

"She's pissed with what I've discovered. She had spent a fortune on toys and beds, dog food. She thought she was going to get Rose, and I can't see why she wasn't, unless George has something to do with the dogfighting ring, which I don't get because ... he runs an animal shelter."

Maddie had tears in her eyes.

Bull got to his feet and rounded the desk. He reached out, gripped her chin, and forced her to look at him. "Don't blame yourself."

"How did you know?" she asked.

"I know. I can read people. It's not that hard, and you, you're hurting because you feel if you had seen the signs, you would've been able to protect those dogs."

"He ... how ... I can't even begin to imagine what the hell he was doing," Maddie said. "I don't even have proof, but I just know it. When you arrived with the dogs, he looked nervous, and now, he's freaking out. He's complaining about funding and being shut down, and upsetting people. He's never been like this."

"I'll look into it," Bull said.

"You don't have to do that."

"Maddie, we both know why you came to me."

She covered her face with her hands. "I know. I know. I feel terrible. No, I shouldn't have done this." She got to her feet, but he grabbed her around the waist, pulling her closer to him.

He'd already intended to look into the animal shelter in more detail after Maddie had shown her suspicions a few days ago. Something had been off about that George guy. He didn't know exactly what, but he intended to get to the bottom of it, and he was going to.

“I’m going to look into it, Maddie. They were hurting dogs on my turf. My question to you is if you want to know the truth when I find it out.”

She bit her lip and nodded.

“Fine. I don’t want you volunteering at that shelter.”

She shook her head. “No, I can’t stop. Those dogs need someone.”

He adored how passionate she was. The way she stood up for what she wanted, but there was a time and place to do it.

Her lips were too much of a temptation, and he’d been a very good boss, but his patience only went so far.

There were so many reasons for him not to kiss her, but one taste was all it took, and he couldn’t resist. Sinking his fingers into her hair, he pulled her in close and slammed his lips down on hers.

She was so soft. The silkiness of her hair felt so good, not to mention her body. He loved her curves, especially how they felt against his body. Maddie was made for him. The fullness of her tits grazed his chest, and he wanted to see more of her, to have her completely naked.

Maddie put her hands on his chest, but she didn’t push him away. Instead, she gripped the lapel of his jacket, and a slight moan escaped her lips. The sound went straight to his cock, and he wanted to take her right there on his desk. No one would disturb him. He could finally have what he’d been craving.

The sound of a knock interrupted them, and Maddie jerked away.

Her lips were swollen from his kisses. He licked his lips and gritted his teeth. “Who is it?” he asked.

“It’s Pat. I got a hit on that name,” he said. “Do you want me to come back later?”

“I should go,” Maddie said.

He didn’t remove his hands. Her body was a dream. She was made for him.

She licked her lips and wouldn’t look at him.

He let go of her hip to place a finger beneath her chin and tilt her head back. She finally looked at him with those gorgeous brown eyes of hers. Some days she wore glasses, others, she had to wear contacts. He didn’t care. When it came to Maddie, he saw her as perfect.

“This isn’t over.”

“This ... I ... I’m not going to stop volunteering at the animal shelter. I don’t know what shady stuff George is into, but it’s not going to scare me away.”

“I’m not talking about the animal shelter.” He already intended to put one of his prospects on surveillance of the place. George had pissed him off for the last time.

“Oh.”

“Yeah, oh.” He kissed her lips. “We’ll talk soon.”

“This was nothing.”

He took her hand and placed it on his stiff dick. “This isn’t nothing.”

Her face was so red.

Bull wasn’t used to women being so embarrassed easily. The temptation to push her to see just how far he could was so strong, but he held himself back. There was other business to attend to.

“I want you back at the shop tomorrow,” he said.

“Oh, but—”

“No buts. You have a job to do, and I expect you there.” He was going to be the one to keep an eye on her.

“I’m not a child. You don’t need to treat me like one.”

“I have no intention of treating you like a child, but I will certainly make sure your cute ass remains that way.” He winked at her, and once again, she bowed her head and made her escape. He let her go, but he intended to follow her.

Chapter Six

Maddie didn't know how people lived their lives as if nothing was going on, when her nerves were close to shredding. Every time the phone rang, she wondered if something had happened at the animal shelter or even to Hellen. Her paranoia was at an all-time high.

"This is what you get when you kiss the devil."

Her mother would be berating her from beyond the grave. She had to concentrate on work. After pulling her glasses from out of her hair, she slid them on and the invoice magically made a whole lot more sense.

She expected the delivery to arrive in thirty minutes. Bull had already made a space for it in the back, and seeing as they had a low customer footfall, he wanted her to check over the inventory of what came in and what they already had.

The back of the garage stank of parts, oil, car fumes, and other things she didn't have a name for.

Maddie looked at some of the codes on the sheet and checked the main shelf to see if they matched up, and each time they did, and they had the correct number, she was happy. Anything that didn't add up, she needed to put a question mark against. Bull had said he would check over everything once she was done.

She was sure he was attempting to keep her busy rather than allowing her to dwell on what was going on.

Nothing is going on.

No? Then why did you get that feeling something wasn't right with George?

She rubbed at her temples. Hellen had sent her a text late last night. George had yelled at her and told her if she didn't start to do her job properly, she wouldn't have one to come back to. It was ironic considering Hellen was also a volunteer. George had always seemed like a nice guy. A little full of himself at times, but for the most part, stand-up. She had always enjoyed seeing him and talking with him. His focus had always seemed to be on the animals and nothing else.

"It's late," Bull said.

She released a squeal and spun around to see him standing in the entryway to the back of the garage. "You scared me."

“So I see.”

“It can’t be late. We’ve still got a delivery.” She glanced down at her watch and saw it was a little after six. “Huh, what the hell happened?”

“Time runs away with you when you’re having fun.”

She sighed. “This isn’t fun.” She turned to look at him.

They had kissed just yesterday. His lips had been on hers, and it was embarrassing to admit he was her first real kiss. She couldn’t help but lick her lips, almost as if she could taste him on her tongue.

“What are you thinking about?” Bull asked.

“Nothing.” She hated lying.

“Liar.” He took a step inside the room.

Maddie held still, watching him as he advanced into the room. She had nowhere else to go. Biting her lip, she couldn’t help but wonder at just how far he’d be willing to go. Would he stop before he reached her, or would he come right at her? Did she want him to come at her? To kiss her?

She was so confused. Men had never treated her like this.

“You’re thinking about that kiss, aren’t you?” He stepped until he was right in front of her. She had no choice but to tilt her head back to look at him. To see the sharp greenness of his eyes. The scar that ran down his lip caught her attention. She wasn’t afraid, she was tempted. His lips had felt amazing on hers. The firmness of them.

After tucking her hair behind her ear, she readjusted her glasses and returned her attention to him. “I think it’s best if I go.”

“What are you afraid of?” he asked.

“I’m not afraid of anything.”

“Are you afraid of being alone with me?”

“You’re not scary, Bull.”

“I don’t know if that makes you foolish or brave.”

She took a deep breath. Glancing down at the paperwork, she stepped that last little inch closer to him and placed the pad against his chest. “I know what you were doing today, and as much as I appreciate it, I don’t need to be treated like a child.”

Maddie let go, and the pad of paperwork fell to the floor. Bull didn’t even bother to reach out and grab it, instead, he captured her wrist and pulled her closer to him. With his other hand, he banded his arm around her waist, and she gasped at feeling his cock pressed against her stomach.

“Believe me, Maddie, the last thing I think of you as is a child.” The hand on her waist moved across her back, going down until he grabbed her ass. “I get you’ve got a lot of shit on your mind. Most people do. It’s natural. What I want to know is if you’ve been thinking about our kiss.”

She loved the way he grabbed her ass. The feel of his hard cock against her stomach. She didn’t want to like it, but she looked at his lips and had this desire for him to kiss her again.

Bull was a mystery. She knew her mother would be so angry if she even for a second considered being with this man.

She made your life miserable.

Maddie cut off the thoughts of her mother. She didn’t want her to plague this moment. Within seconds, both of Bull’s hands were on her ass, and his lips were on hers.

She cried out, circling her hands around his neck, drawing him to her, kissing him back. With her first moan, he plunged his tongue into her mouth, and she tasted him, the sharpness of his coffee. He demanded it black with no sugar. There was no sweetness to him. In her arms, he was all fiery and wild heat.

Bull moved her back, and before she knew what was happening, he had his hands on her waist. He lifted her, placing her on top of one of the counters. Some of the contents spilled to the ground, but Bull didn’t stop.

His hands though, they moved from her ass, up to sink into her hair, to curve her face. She loved how the kissing never stopped.

His lips helped to make her forget herself and everything around her. She moaned his name, not wanting him to stop, desperate for him to keep on kissing her. She craved his heat, his touch, his everything.

She had never felt like this with anyone.

Bull made her whole body vibrate with need. The men she’d talked to online, the dates she’d arranged, none of them had made her feel like this. Almost reckless in her need. Bull’s hands went to her shoulders and then down until he cupped her tits, and this made her cry out and break the kiss.

“I have to see you,” he said.

She wore an oversized t-shirt that had seen better days, but with quick easy movements, Bull had it up over her head and tossed aside. She wore a lacy bra. She liked having nice lingerie. They helped her to feel sexy with the soft lace rubbing against her skin.

“Oh, fuck me, I should have known.” He cupped her tits, pressing them together. His mouth going to each mound as he nibbled on the flesh.

Heat bloomed between her thighs, and Maddie tried to squeeze them together, but Bull was in the way, his hard body keeping them open.

Opening her eyes, she noticed straight across from her was a window. With the way the light reflected, she got to see herself. She wasn’t thin. Beneath her tits, she saw the evidence of the extra weight she carried in the roll of her stomach.

Maddie tensed up and quickly covered her chest.

Bull must have sensed the change in her as she tried to hide her body from him.

“I ... can I have my shirt please?”

“Maddie, what’s going on?” he asked.

“Nothing’s going on.” She forced a smile to her lips. “I just want my shirt please.”

He kept on looking at her.

The truth was that she wanted to go run and hide. His kisses had been the fire she needed, but at the sight of her body, she was ashamed of herself. Her mother had always told her to cover up, to stay hidden.

“Maddie?” He bent down, and she quickly pulled on her shirt. She climbed off the counter, and even though it was so mortifying, she forced herself to look at him. “I’ve got to go.”

He cupped her face. “Tell me what the fuck is going on.”

“I’m tired. I’m sorry. I don’t ... I’m not ... I don’t have sex randomly,” she said. She crossed her arms around her body. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

The days were all blending in.

Bull didn’t attempt to stop her, and for that, she was grateful. All she wanted to do was go home, curl up in bed, and cry.

She left the stockroom, grabbed her stuff, and didn’t linger to help close up. With her head firmly down, so there was no way for anyone to know what she’d been doing, she pretty much ran all the way home.

There was no quick pit stop at the diner for some food. She made it to her apartment, raced up the steps, twisted her key in the lock, and slammed the door shut, putting all the bolts and locks into place before she crumbled down to the floor.

Tears filled her eyes. She couldn't help but touch her lips, imagining Bull's lips back on hers. It had been one hell of a kiss.

Her body still tingled from his touch. She was on fire with need, but she didn't give in to it.

Each tear fell down her cheek, and it was a horrible reminder of what a loser she was.

"No one is going to want a fat girl, Maddie. You've got to lose weight or accept that you're alone."

"Damn it, Maddie, what have I told you? You don't even fit into your brand-new dress."

"That's it. I've had enough of you, you're going on a diet."

Every other week, her mother had some cruel comment to make about her weight. About how she looked. There was even a time she had told her that she felt like she'd been cursed with an ugly child.

Wiping the tears from her eyes, Maddie got to her feet and walked into the kitchen.

She opened her fridge and looked inside. There was some chocolate milk, cheeses, meats, a few pieces of cake, fruits and vegetables.

Maddie closed her eyes, and she pictured Bull's hands all over her body. The feel of his lips on her chest. Then she saw the flash of the image of herself. How fat she looked. Was he doing this out of pity?

Crying out, she hated that more than anything. She had been a pity fuck once before, and she wasn't going to be so again.

She grabbed the trash bin and went back to her fridge, where she removed everything but the fruits and vegetables. Then she went through every single cupboard. Rather than throw out the garbage she put in her mouth, she grabbed a spare box and started to load it up. Tomorrow, before she went to work, she'd make a pit stop at the food shelter. She was tired of living this way, of being this person. She had been fat all her life and been told it time and time again, but she wasn't going to cry about it anymore. Instead, she was going to do something.

She wouldn't be a pity fuck for another person again.

So Marshall Smith happened to be related to a fucking city crime boss. He was far away from home, but Bull had a feeling this wasn't a coincidence. Marshall Smith was an alias for Craig Ranford Junior. His

brother, Willian Ranford, had a very colorful reputation. None of it at all good. Just reading about it gave Bull chills. If it had been anyone else, they might have been terrified, but William wasn't the first crime boss Bull had to deal with. Of course, blowing out his brother's kneecaps hadn't been the smartest move he'd made.

Still, at his request, Rusty had put a reach out at him so they could talk. Now, he had to wait and see.

He wasn't afraid. It had been a long time since he was afraid of anything.

No, Bull had other matters on his hands, which extended to the pretty brunette currently standing in his reception dealing with some paperwork he'd set her. Maddie was slowly organizing his business. He wasn't the best person when it came to official documents and all of that shit, and from the miracle she'd done of the reception room, he was more than happy with her to take the reins.

What he didn't like was the way she had looked last night. Something had spooked her when she'd brought an end to their kiss. One he was fucking enjoying as well. In fact, he had loved getting her shirt off, and her tits nearly out into his palm. He had loved the surprise of her underwear. The lace had looked good on her.

"Boss, you want to come and check over this car?" Pat asked, knocking on his door.

He looked up. "What car?"

"Sweet's finished the current beauty he was working on. Remember the recover and the branding the guy wanted on his car? You asked for Sweet to come in and do it. Well, he's done."

Bull got to his feet. He remembered now. Sweet considered himself an artist, and with the ink Bull had all over his body, he would have to agree. Sweet was mighty with the ink needle, and the work he did on the cars was some of the best Bull had seen.

Admittedly, Sweet didn't know a single thing about cars, but that didn't stop him from making them pop.

He walked into the main shop and saw Sweet had grabbed Maddie from the office to admire his work.

"What do you think?" Sweet asked when he saw him.

"It's looking good."

He saw the way Maddie tensed as he entered the room, and it pissed him off. Last night had been a mutual feeling. He hadn't attacked her. She had wanted his kisses, and the first time she said no, he'd backed off.

There was no reason for her to be afraid of his presence, and he found it rather insulting.

"I was getting a chick's advice here, Prez. She likes it, and I think the guy will certainly be picking up some pussy as he drives this bad boy to wherever he wants to go." The colors were bright. They sparkled, and there was a picture of a skull across each passenger door. At the customer's request, he also asked for a coffin to be added to the driver's side.

Personally, Bull had found that a little tacky. He couldn't exactly tell a customer what they could or couldn't have. The man had been determined, and seeing as he was going to pay to have the work done, he didn't see why he couldn't get his best man on the job.

"Well, Maddie, would you be interested in taking a drive by a man in this car?" Sweet asked.

"I'm not the right person to ask about this."

"Come on. It will be a big help."

She shook her head. "No, I wouldn't. I'm sorry. This is just all wrong. It looks amazing, though. You're incredibly talented, but come on. On a car, a graveyard and skull?"

"The dude had it inked on his body. He said his car was an extension of himself, and this is what he wanted."

"Right, okay. Yeah, that makes total sense."

Bull smiled.

Sweet leaned up against the car as he looked at Maddie. His gaze ran up and down her body, assessing her. "You ever had some ink?"

Maddie shook her head.

"You know, if you ever change your mind, I don't mind being your first." He winked at Maddie, and the smile on her lips fell.

"Er, I better go."

Bull wasn't going to let her get away that easily. He grabbed her arm and looked back to Pat and Sweet. "Keep an eye on the shop."

Maddie didn't fight him as he pulled her into his office, and this time, he slammed the door closed and locked it.

She had nowhere to go.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“You’re going to tell me what your problem is.”

“I don’t have a problem. This is insane. I’m going back to work.”

He stood by the door, arms folded, and wouldn’t let her pass.

“Seriously, Bull, I have work to do.”

“I know exactly what you’ve got to do, seeing as I was the one who gave you the work in the first place. Remember, I hired you.”

“Yes, I do remember, very clearly.” She folded her arms beneath her chest, and for a short second, he was distracted by the fullness of her tits. He wanted them in his hands, but he quickly got to the point.

Last night had been going so great until Maddie froze on him.

“You know I would never hurt you.”

“I don’t know what this is about.”

“You wanted my kisses last night, Maddie. You were enjoying my touch.”

“Is that what this is about?” she asked. “Because I changed my mind. A woman can do that, you know? She can change her mind.”

“I have no problem about you changing your mind. What I want to know is why.”

“I don’t have to tell you why,” she said.

“No? And you think that’s fair?” he asked.

“Does it matter if it’s fair? I don’t have to give a reason. I...” She closed her eyes and held one hand out. “I’m sorry if I gave you the wrong impression.”

“Bull fucking shit. Don’t try to play me, Maddie. It won’t fucking work. I’m the master at that shit.” He took a step toward her. He was a grown man and could handle a shit load of rejection, not that he’d experienced much of it. Most had come from this woman in front of him, but she had also shown him part of herself. The part that had started out enjoying his touch. “I saw you, Maddie. I felt you. I ... I know you were like fire in my arms, ready to go up in flames. I felt it. I know what it was like. I wanted you again, and again. You craved my kisses, you wanted my hands on your body. What the fuck did I do to change it?”

Tears glistened in her eyes, and her lip wobbled.

She shook her head, biting her lip, and he saw how torn up she was. It broke his fucking heart. No woman had ever hit him like this, but damn it,

Maddie was proving to be more special than he anticipated, and it was fucking killing him inside.

“Maddie, talk to me.”

She took a deep breath. “You didn’t do anything wrong.”

This made him laugh, and it wasn’t a natural one either. This was very much forced.

“Maddie, I was there, I felt the difference between us. I know something wasn’t right.”

She licked her lips, which she pursed immediately after.

He watched her sigh, and then, she nodded. “I ... I’m not like the other women you’ve been with,” she said.

“What the fuck is that supposed to mean? You haven’t spread your legs for every single guy at the club. That isn’t something to be upset about.”

She shook her head. “No, that’s not what I meant.” She unfolded her arms and moved her hands up and down her body. “I don’t *look* like the women you go for.”

He stared at her and knew instantly what she referred to. She wasn’t slender. She was all curves everywhere.

“So?” he asked.

She looked up to the ceiling, and tears fell down her cheeks. He hated seeing her like this, so cut up, so miserable. This wasn’t what he wanted her to feel.

He took a step toward her, and Maddie took a step back.

Bull stopped. “Did you like my kisses?”

“What does that have to do with it?”

“Just answer the question.” He needed her. Seeing her cry and hearing the slight break in her voice broke him. All he wanted to do was pull her into his arms and tell her how fucking desirable she was. How he ached for her. How he’d waited so long to tell her that he’d wanted her.

For years, he’d been admiring her curves, wanting to get closer to her, but she seemed so far away.

“Yes.”

“Yes, what?”

“Damn it, Bull. You know I liked your kisses. You know I loved having your hands on me. I loved it. It felt incredible, and I didn’t want it to

stop, but I don't want to be a damn pity fuck. I don't want to be that person. Not again."

"Not again? You mean this has happened before?"

She released a growl. "Ugh, can't you just accept that I'm not the kind of woman you want?"

"Hell no. Not when you don't fucking see what is clearly right under your stubborn nose."

"I know how this goes. You have your fun. You've done your deed to charity and then I'm tossed aside."

"First of all, I have never in all my life been so insulted, and considering I fucking run Chaos and Carnage, that's saying something. I would never pity fuck you, Maddie French. In fact, what I want to do is strip you naked, bend you over all the surfaces, and fuck every single part of you. I crave you that much."

Her mouth fell open, and he nodded. "I don't know what has gotten into your thick fucking skull, but when I look at you, I don't see what you do." There was no way he was going to let the word *fat* fall from his lips. He didn't see her like that. She wasn't fat, not to him. He closed the distance between them, grabbed her hand, and pressed it against his dick. "I wouldn't get hard to pity you. I'm not here thinking about some other woman I want to stick my cock into. No, this is all you. Every single part of you. I didn't give you a damn job out of pity. I gave it to you so I would finally get the chance to be close to you. To chase after you, because Maddie, you have been a pain in my ass for a long fucking time."

"What?"

"Yeah, I've been wanting to approach you for some time now. This isn't a new feeling for me. I've watched you for a long time, Maddie. I see you. Other women, they don't hold a candle to you."

He wrapped an arm around her waist and took possession of her lips, hard. At first, she was tense in his arms, but slowly, she ran her hands up his chest and wrapped them around his neck.

Bull loved her juicy ass. It was so full and ripe. All he wanted to do was land a nice smack to the curve and to feel it fill his hands.

He pulled away from the kiss. "I want to know who made you think you were a pity fuck, and then we're going to start taking this slow."

"Slow?"

“Yeah, Maddie, you’re going to go on a date with me, and I’m not taking no for an answer.”

Chapter Seven

Maddie had been on several dates. She'd gone to prom. None of them made her feel quite so nervous as this date Bull had demanded. She kept expecting him to call to put an end to their date, for him to apologize, but her cell phone seemed oddly silent.

He was going to pick her up at her apartment and they were going to the bar for some food and dancing. It seemed like a simple enough date. Maddie couldn't help but wonder what would go wrong first. Would he show up? Would he get the classic mystery emergency that came in time before the bill?

"Stop this, Maddie. Stop this."

She hated how pessimistic she had gotten in the past few years. The dates she'd been on before had been awful. No doubt about it. No matter how bad it had gotten, she had remained confident she'd find someone. Only now, she was the one spiraling into the deep pool of doubt and depression.

She looked in the mirror.

A few strokes of mascara and some lipstick were all she wore. She was never someone who knew how to really doll herself up. She had opted for a pair of jeans, her nicest, along with some boots and a checkered shirt that she had left a few buttons open.

Bull had said casual, and this was what she had chosen.

She'd left her hair down, and because of how heavy her hair was, it remained flat. To get any real volume, she normally had to curl it. The glasses were by her bedside cabinet, since she wore contacts.

Maddie left her bedroom and went into the kitchen. She grabbed a glass from the cabinet and poured herself a drink of water. She had read drinking water before a meal, and even after a meal, helped the feeling of fullness start.

She finished off the first pint of water, then poured herself a second. With that done, she cleaned and washed the glass.

She entered her sitting room, sat down on the sofa, and stared at the clock.

He had three minutes left to arrive.

Maddie hated how hopeful she was as she watched the clock tick. Time was already moving. She was older this second than the last. A constant moving force. Each time the clock hand ticked, it was another moment wasted.

When the clock finally landed on seven, she knew he wasn't going to show up.

She got to her feet, intending to get changed, when her buzzer sounded.

Maddie frowned and walked over to the door. She clicked on the buzzer. "Hello," she said.

"Maddie, it's me. I can't believe this piece of shit actually works."

"Bull?"

"Who else? You got multiple dates set up? Are you going to let me up?"

"You came."

He chuckled. "I told you I would."

She hadn't believed it.

"Are you going to let me come up?" he asked.

"No, I mean, I'm coming down. Give me a minute." Maddie let go of the buzzer and looked around her apartment. She didn't want him coming up here. None of her dates had made it to her apartment.

Her hands shook as she grabbed her bag and keys. She took the stairs down and saw Bull waiting for her outside. He hadn't seen her.

Should I go?

Nerves hit her hard.

Bull turned around and held his hands out. He wore his leather cut, a pair of jeans, and his trademark white shirt. She wondered if he owned shares in the white-shirt-making business or something like that.

Smiling to herself, she took a step toward him, then another, and another. She was out the door and in front of him within seconds.

"You came," she said.

"I did come, and I've got this," he said. He held up a daisy. It was a single large daisy.

"It's beautiful."

He tore some of the stem off, moved close to her, and slid it in the front pocket of her shirt.

She smiled. "Thank you."

"I don't know why, but I was expecting you to have your hair pinned back."

"Do you not like it?" she asked, running her fingers through her very boring hair.

Bull stood in front of her, stroking her hair out of the way, curving his hand around her face, and drawing her close. He pressed a kiss to her lips, and she couldn't help but smile.

"I do."

Her heart raced. Already this date was winning points way before they were getting started.

"I'm going to let you off tonight as I've brought the car," Bull said and pointed at his car. "One day though, you're going to need to learn to ride at my back, baby."

Maddie groaned. "I've never ridden on the back of a bike before."

"Don't worry, it's a lot easier than you might think. You have an expert right here." He tapped his chest and winked at her. "I'll talk you through everything when it's time to ride a bike, but for now, your ride awaits." He got to the car and held the door open for her.

"You're going to have plenty of practice to ride my bike at other times."

She nodded and was pleased she wasn't going to have to deal with riding his bike tonight. She wouldn't be able to handle those pesky nerves of hers. When the time came, he was going to want her to hold on to him. Not only that, what if she toppled them both over? That could end up being the worst date of all.

Bull closed the door to his car and rounded the vehicle, then got into the driver's seat. The car was much better than his bike.

You can do this. It's just a date.

She shoved her keys into her purse and rested it on her lap. With each moment that passed, she wondered if he regretted asking her on this date. She hated these nerves. They were a giant pain in the butt.

He reached over and grabbed her hand. "Babe, when we're on the bike, you're going to have to really hold on to me."

"I ... er ... I don't know..."

He pressed a kiss to her knuckles. "Relax." He locked their fingers together. "It's just the two of us.

She nodded her head. "Right. Yes. Right."

I'm not affected by him being so close to me. This is normal. I'm just sitting beside him while he's driving his car.

He revved the engine and she gasped. Her hold on his hand tightened, and he chuckled.

"I'm going to take it slow," he said. "You know I'm not a dangerous man."

She laughed. "Of course. Why would I think for a second that the leader of the Chaos and Carnage MC is dangerous?"

He glanced over at him, and she smiled. "Ah, you're teasing me."

"Just a little bit."

She liked the way he held her hand. It helped her to feel somewhat grounded, and she was a little thankful he hadn't brought his bike to this date. She didn't want to be afraid, and riding on the back of his bike, she knew there was a risk that would happen.

Maddie held his hand, not wanting to let him go. It was an odd comfort. This wasn't so bad.

"Maddie, you've got to learn to trust me, babe," Bull said.

It was the only warning she got before he pressed his foot to the gas and sped up.

She gasped. He wasn't breaking any speed limits, and his car felt amazing and smooth.

She spotted the bar up ahead, and he slowly brought the car to a stop.

"We're here," he said.

She looked up at the neon sign of the bar. The drive hadn't taken long at all.

"Oh," Maddie said.

Bull still held her hand. "You made it in one piece."

She nodded. "Of course, I did. It wasn't like you were driving like a maniac."

He let her hand go. "Come on, it's time for us to head on inside." He turned off the ignition, and Maddie opened the car door. Her legs felt a little wobbly. She didn't even realize how tense she had been.

Bull came to her, wrapping an arm around her waist, and she happily sank against him. He chuckled. "This is one of the reasons you've got to learn to relax. You're tense from riding a car with me. Imagine what it would be like when you finally ride at my back."

"Bikes are death traps."

"Not mine. I would never put your life in danger, Maddie, you've got to know that."

She lifted her head. "I do." She didn't even know how she knew, just that she did.

He smiled. "How are those legs?"

"Like jelly."

He chuckled again. "They will be for some time. Come on, let's go and get some dinner." He held her hand as they walked across the parking lot. Loud music came from the bar, and Maddie saw several people standing out in the night, smoking. There were one or two people on their own, and a small crowd talking amongst themselves.

They entered the bar together, and several heads turned in their direction. Maddie wondered what they were all thinking, but Bull just walked right up to the spare seats in the restaurant part of the bar and held out her chair.

If she had a point system, he would be high up on the list.

Bull sat opposite her and smiled. "How are you feeling?"

"Fine. Nervous, but fine."

"You have nothing to be nervous about," he said. "We're just two consenting adults having a date."

"Have you been on many dates?"

"Not many successful ones, and that's if they showed up."

"I find that hard to believe."

He picked out the menus and handed her one. "Why?"

"I don't know. I'm sure I've seen you around town with women before."

"Women have followed me around, but we both know a stalker doesn't qualify as a date."

She chuckled, taking the menu from him.

"You didn't tell me about the guy. The pity guy."

"There's nothing to tell."

“There’s a story there.”

She sighed, looking up from her menu. “Fine. It was my prom date, if you must know. I’m not giving names. I’m not even going to tell you about him. There’s nothing else you need to know about him. We had a great prom. He asked me, and I thought he liked me. We had sex that night, and it was awful. It turned out the only reason he slept with me was out of pity. He said everyone should leave high school without their virginity intact.” She shrugged. “That’s all you’re getting.”

“You know that’s bullshit, right?”

“What part?”

“The part he didn’t make it good for you.”

She shrugged. “I ... we were both kids.”

“Yeah, and at eighteen, I knew how to satisfy a woman. I’m so sick and tired of these amateur assholes who think they know best when they clearly know fuck all.” He looked down at his menu. “Tell me about a successful date. One that I can compete with.”

She laughed. Maddie tried to contain her amusement, but it didn’t work.

The thought of having a successful date seemed almost too good to be true, and it was.

“That doesn’t sound good,” he said.

“Let’s not talk about previous dates. Believe me, this one is the best so far.”

“It is?”

“Yep,” Maddie said.

Bull put the menu down and folded his arms. “I’m intrigued.”

“About?”

“Please tell me you’ve had one successful date. At least one where the guy has shown you how much pleasure there is between a man and a woman.”

Her face was on fire. This wasn’t good. This wasn’t the topic of conversation she wanted to talk about. This would make their date head to disaster straight away.

Bull didn’t get off on learning about Maddie’s previous experience with men. In fact, the very thought of another man being anywhere near her

pissed him the fuck off, and he wanted to slaughter every single man who had ever touched her. But he was ... vexed.

"Not every date leads to sex."

"Maddie."

She tilted her head to the side, and he'd come to see that action meant she wasn't happy. She was uncomfortable. He wanted to know why.

"Bull, please, this date was going so good. Let us just enjoy our date. Okay?"

He looked at her and he didn't know why he knew, he just did.

"The only time you've had sex is with that fucker at prom, isn't it?"

Maddie gasped and looked around the restaurant. "Could you keep your voice down? I don't want everyone knowing my business."

She kept on glaring at him, but she could glare all she wanted, he was pissed off. Actually, scrap that, he had gone past pissed off to downright fucking angry. She didn't need to give him a name. He had resources and ways of finding that shit out.

"It's true," he said. "Tell me."

"I don't have to tell you anything." She slammed the menu down.

"You're not leaving," he said.

"You're not the boss of me, Bull." She went to get up, and she didn't know what Bull had done, but her chair wouldn't budge.

"I told you, you're not leaving."

"What the hell are you doing?" she asked.

"I want you to answer my question."

She glared at him, wanting to spew a lot more hatred his way.

Bull was more determined than ever to get the answers to his questions. Maddie wasn't very forthcoming unless he counted her stare as an actual answer.

He looked at her and waited.

She kept her arms folded, and fortunately, it meant no one dared to approach their table. He was getting hungry.

"You can't keep me here."

"True, I can't, but you see, we can either do this here as civilized people, or we can do it out in the street. Your choice."

“There’s no choice here. I don’t have to tell you anything about what happened in my life, and to be frank with you, I think this is rude.”

“If I’m being honest with you, I find the kid who fucked you when you were eighteen exceedingly rude. Make that every single asshole who has been on a date with you. Not to mention the ones who didn’t even bother to show. I think all of them are assholes.”

She sat up, putting both of her hands flat on the table. “Why is this even any of your business?”

“You’re right, it’s not my business, but I want to know exactly what my woman has been through.”

“Your woman?”

“Yeah, my woman.” He put his hands on the table, the same way she had, and leaned forward. “I don’t like the thought of any man putting his hands on you, Maddie. Least of all, doing it the wrong way.”

Her stomach chose that moment to growl. “This was a big mistake.”

“No, it’s not. You know it.”

She laughed. “So you think you know me now?”

“I do know you.”

She shook her head. “Let me clue you in then, my parents, especially my mother right now, would be turning in her grave. She never liked you, or your club. She hated every single one of you.”

He shrugged. It wasn’t like there was anything new in that statement. A whole lot of people didn’t like him or his club, and they had a right. He wasn’t known for being nice.

There hadn’t been a lot of chaos in the past decade, and that was because of his careful choices, but if her mother had remembered even a smidge of what the club was like when his father was in rule, then he couldn’t blame her.

“She sounds like a sensible woman.”

“Oh, believe me, the woman was never known to mince words. Not even to her own daughter. She told me plenty of times what my faults were.”

“What do you mean?” he asked. He had liked her mother for a split second, but Maddie was so easy to read. He saw the pain in her gaze.

Maddie’s mother had hurt her in such a deep and profound way. Every instinct in Bull told him to protect her. To pull her close and to not let

anyone get to her, but he had a feeling if he even attempted to do that, she'd run in the opposite direction.

All the fight Maddie had evaporated, just like that. She collapsed back in her chair and picked up her menu. "I don't want to talk about it. Can we just eat so we can leave?" she asked.

He didn't want to do that. Tilting his head to the side, he watched her.

"You know our parents are known to be fucking liars," he said.

"How would you know?"

"My dad's dying words were to tell me how much I'd fuck up the club."

"You haven't though. You guys are so successful," Maddie said.

He chuckled. "He told me I didn't have what it took to walk in his shoes. I'd ruin the club and the entire town with how I'd handle things." He wasn't about to tell Maddie that he was the one responsible for killing his father. There were a few details of his life she didn't need to know.

"I'm so sorry."

"Then don't listen to your mother."

Maddie smiled. "My mother is a little different."

"How?" He wanted to get the truth out of her one way or another.

She shrugged. "She just was. She told me the truth. Kind of like your brother."

"What does my brother have to do with this?" If he needed to, he'd kick Grant's ass all over town for her.

Maddie sighed and tucked some hair behind her ear. "You're not going to let this go, are you?"

"Nope, and if you want food, you're going to have to tell me."

She took a deep breath and put the menu down. "Fine. I will tell you, but you've got to promise me you won't react to anything I say. It's the truth, and I know it, so I don't need lies or pity. Got it?"

He liked her like this. Somewhat dominant, hardcore, sexy as fuck.

"Got it," he said.

Bull didn't know what he expected. Maybe for her mother to say she had to work harder at school, to get the grades she needed. Maddie had never gone to college, and just a brief background check showed she'd never left town.

“She would tell me often that I was ugly. That I was too fat, and even if I lost the weight, men wouldn’t go for me, because I was never classically beautiful. She always told me that the women who succeed in this world and get the real man are beautiful, slim women, and I didn’t stand a chance right from the start.” She had a smile on her face, her hands pressed together. “Can we eat?”

He was ... gutted.

Maddie didn’t even flinch as she spoke each of those words, almost as if she’d been repeating them in her head, over and over, for the past thirty years.

He had to wonder when it all started. When she was a child? Older? A teenager? Either way, Maddie believed those words.

Lifting his hand, he signaled for a waiter to come and take their order. He didn’t even need to look at the menu to know what he wanted, and told the waitress who’d come over.

Maddie gave her order as well, being sure to make the bulk of what she wanted a salad.

The waitress left soon after, and he couldn’t look away from Maddie.

She turned toward him with a sigh. “So, how are you?”

He kept on staring at her, curious as to who her mother looked at. Maddie, to him, was a very beautiful, very sexy, very desirable woman. He knew this for a fact, seeing as he’d spent a great deal of time admiring her from afar.

“You know your mother’s a piece of shit, don’t you?”

“You shouldn’t speak ill of the dead.”

“It doesn’t stop me from being right.”

She licked her lips, reaching for her small glass of water and taking a sip. He couldn’t help but admire the shape of her neck, seeing the way it moved as she swallowed sips of water. In his mind, he saw his cock in her mouth. Her plump lips wrapped around his length, taking him deep. He’d hit the back of her throat, making her gag on it. She’d be so fucking beautiful, taking it as well.

He’d hold himself between her lips, waiting for her to milk him of every single drop, and she’d drink all of him. Her throat contracting around his spunk as she swallowed every drop.

His cock went stiff at the very image.

“We’re not going to talk about this.”

“I’m not pitying you,” Bull said. “I’m simply stating a fact here. Your mother was fucking wrong. I’m guessing she was a piece of work. Is that why you accepted your asshole prom date?”

She rolled her eyes. “Honestly, you need to drop all of this. It’s all in the past. So very long ago, and you’re making a big deal out of nothing. Please, don’t.”

He shrugged. “I don’t think I can help it. I think you’re a very beautiful woman, Maddie.”

“Okay.”

She was so stubborn.

He got to his feet and held out his hand.

“What are you doing?”

“Dance with me.”

“But our table?”

“It’s my table, Maddie. No one will sit in it.” And if anyone did, people would immediately intervene.

Maddie looked at his hand as if it was going to bite her. He did like to bite, but he wouldn’t embarrass her too much in public.

She slowly slid her hand into his, and there was that feeling again. Bull couldn’t deny the zing of electricity that worked its way up his arm at the single contact of her hand on his. He felt on fire, connected to her.

Locking their fingers together, he walked her onto the dance floor. It helped that people moved out of his way when he was near. He wasn’t going to be embarrassed by that. People knew to get the fuck out of his way, and it was exactly how he liked it.

Bull pulled Maddie close, putting his hands on her hips after he wrapped her arms around his neck. He drew her as close to him as possible.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

The music pulsed in the background, but it all faded away. He didn’t need the music to dance with her.

“I wanted to talk to you without a table separating us.” He moved his pelvis against her so she had no doubt as to his aroused state.

Her eyes went a little wide. “Bull?”

“Yeah, that’s me. I’m a stubborn asshole. I embrace that about myself.” He pressed a kiss to her neck. “Your mother was a liar and a

fucking bitch, Maddie. You are not ugly. You are perfect. Do you have any idea how long I've been waiting to talk to you, to get close to you?" He couldn't resist a little nibble on her neck.

She released a gasp, and he groaned. He couldn't wait to get her in his bed. She would be so vocal. She was so responsive already with the few smallest of touches and just hearing her was making him harder than he'd ever been in his life.

"Bull, you don't have to lie."

"Oh, baby, I'm not lying. I don't believe in lying. I think nothing good ever comes from liars." He had been known to torture a couple in his time. Even kill a few. Not that he was about to tell Maddie the bright colorful past that was part of his very existence. She didn't need to know he'd taken a lot of lives. So much so people were afraid of him. "I've watched you around town. The way you walk, the sway of your hips, that's so fucking sexy, and it calls to me. I'd watch your ass, your tits. Did you know I could sit and watch you walk toward me, with those tits swaying, for days?"

He flicked his tongue across her neck. "It's true. All of it. I want to fuck you, Maddie. I want to make you mine in every single way possible. I want to take your pussy, your mouth, your ass, until you can't walk because you are so full of my cock and my cum." He wasn't going to delve into another deeper fantasy, one that involved her taking his cum like a good woman and getting pregnant with his kid. The latest one was a new fantasy. One he was a little surprised at because he'd never wanted children, not for a long time.

"I'm not lying to you, Maddie. I want to show you every single dirty, amazing thing that could be had between a mad and a woman. I'm not wanting to show you this out of pity either. I want to show you because I can't get enough of you."

He'd hired her to keep her close, and now, he intended to stake his claim on her.

Chapter Eight

The following day, Maddie was still in an alternate universe inside her mind. After Bull's revelation on the dance floor, their food had been ready. They enjoyed a meal to which the topic of conversation had changed quite quickly and rapidly. Bull had talked about the garage, the diner, the upcoming town fair that helped to raise money for the local foster kids. Not to mention the animal shelter's latest event as well.

She didn't like thinking about the animal shelter. Hellen had called her to say that George hadn't arrived at work yesterday. She wasn't due to go to the shelter until this afternoon.

Running fingers through her hair, she glanced down at the appointment book.

Bull was in the main shop.

Once they had finished dinner last night, Bull had danced with her for some time before taking her home. She hadn't been ready to invite him in for a coffee or anything else. He had stayed in his car and waited for her to enter her building.

It had been the best date of her life.

Since arriving at the shop, Bull had been busy. He already had two cars up on the ramps. Pat had been with him, and they'd been talking for a good half an hour while she tidied up from the previous day, did a bit of dusting, and then headed out for breakfast for them. She'd already delivered their pastry to them along with the coffee in the main shop. It was rare for them to eat out on the main floor with all the muck and grease, but there was always a first time for everything.

Maddie sipped at her coffee.

Her weight loss kick had hit a snag last night with ordering a burger. This morning, she'd woken up and enjoyed a small bowl of oats with non-dairy milk and a single banana. Coffee was more than what she needed.

She had a brown rice bowl in her bag she'd made herself for lunch, complete with a hummus sauce.

"Hello, beautiful," Bull said, coming out of the shop. He placed a hand at her back and kissed her cheek.

At first, she tensed up from the contact, and then, slowly, she accepted his touch and smiled.

“Morning,” she said.

He’d been the perfect gentleman to her.

Bull rounded the counter so he stood in front of her. He took a large gulp of coffee before tearing open his pastry. It was a special Carl had done for him. Breakfast wrapped in some puff pastry.

“Apparently Carl said to give him a real challenge next time,” Maddie said.

Bull chuckled. “Don’t worry, I will.”

“What is all that about?” she asked.

“Ah, Carl is a good guy. He’s a fantastic cook. He told me he could cook anything. Every now and then, I throw out little tasks to see if he can handle it. The key is to cook what I want, offer it out to the diner, and to see if it sells good. Most of the people of Carnage are little taster bunnies.”

She smiled. “Carl is the best cook around, no doubt.”

“Got it right. So, how are things looking today?”

“Slow. Not too many challenges.”

“I’m going to need to order a whole new engine,” Bull said. “I’m going to need Neilson’s contact details so I can give him the bad news. I don’t want you handling the call.”

She moved toward the shelf where the files of current projects that were ongoing were. She found Neilson’s file and handed it straight to him. She had no problem with him dealing with that particular client, especially as he had a reputation for being ... mean.

“Everything you need is in there,” she said.

“I want to take you out tonight.”

“You do?”

“Yep. I’ll pick you up at the shelter.”

“You know I’m going.”

“I know I can’t stop you, but I’m not going to worry. I’ve got a few of my guys close by. They know to keep an eye on you. Don’t worry. Nothing is going to happen to you.”

She wasn’t worried at all.

“I better go and deal with this asshole,” Bull said.

“Bull,” she said, stopping him from leaving. She closed her eyes and internally groaned.

“What is it, babe?”

“What is this?” she asked.

“What’s what?”

There was a whole lot of *whats* flying around.

Her mouth was suddenly dry.

“What is going on between us?” she asked. “What is this?”

“I guess that’s for you to know and you to tell me, babe. I know what I want, but the real question here is what you want.”

He turned on his heel and left, leaving her with more questions than she thought were possible.

Pushing some hair out of her face, she got to work on the paperwork he’d left behind. Bull was always so thorough.

She jumped a few minutes after Bull left when she heard him yelling. Neilson was not a good man. There was more arguing.

Glancing toward the main shop, she saw Pat laughing. She couldn’t help but smile as she went back to work.

The day flew by. It wasn’t long before she had to go out and get lunch. Bull was back in the main shop when she delivered it. He stopped what he was doing to kiss her, but he didn’t touch her. His hands were covered in grease.

Bull let her know that she could leave slightly earlier if she wanted to head to the animal shelter. Maddie made sure to complete all the tasks that were expected of her before she left at three. This was early for her.

Normally, she enjoyed closing up with Bull, but she wanted to go and see the dogs. She’d already approached the landlord where she lived, to see if he’d consider changing his policy on no pets. He refused.

There were no pets for a reason.

He said the residents were lucky he accepted kids, because there was a chance if things got real messy, he’d have banned children as well. Not exactly a good reputation to have if he kicked out the small families that lived in the building. She had left, somewhat deflated, but at least families were still able to live there.

She arrived at the main reception at the animal shelter within thirty minutes.

Hellen was at the front counter, looking so upset.

“Is everything okay?”

She nodded. "Yeah, everything is fine. George is organizing the removal of the dogs."

"What?"

"He said he's too short-handed to have them at the shelter and the only logical way of dealing with them is to get rid of them." Hellen sniffled. "I even heard him talking about ... euthanizing them."

"No, he can't do that. The point of the shelter is to give the dogs a chance. To help them find a forever home. We're not a kill shelter." They were the ones who rescued animals from the kill shelter. "I don't get it," Maddie said. "We've even got that fundraising event coming up. That always brings in some good revenue."

Hellen shrugged. "He said there's no ethical way to compete with kids." She sniffled. "I'm sorry."

"I take it he came in then?" Maddie asked.

"Yeah, but now I wished he hadn't." Hellen sobbed.

"I'm going to go and talk to him." Maddie went around the counter and hugged Hellen tightly to her.

"I'm fine. I'm a big girl. I can handle this. I ... this isn't why I volunteered here."

"Neither did I." She didn't volunteer to see healthy dogs get put down. She came to this shelter to help out. To ease the burden on the staff to give the animals the best chance. She wanted to help them in their recovery.

Maddie went to the staffroom, hung up her bag and jacket, and made her way toward George's office in the back. She had to pass a whole load of kennels, and seeing the dogs inside, looking so sad, it was like they knew.

She knocked on the office door, but she'd caught sight of George with his head in his hands, looking down at his desk.

He looked up. "Maddie."

"George, what the hell is going on?"

"Not you too."

"Those dogs are perfectly healthy. They have not posed a threat, and if I recall, your motto used to be that every animal is worth saving."

"Yeah, well, have you ever thought I was wrong, Maddie? For fuck's sake. Look around you. I can't handle this number of dogs."

"Yes, you can. Bull is helping."

"Don't even drag that lowlife into this."

“Lowlife? He’s helping you out with the dogs, George.”

“Yeah, and he needs to learn not to stick his nose into things that are not his problems.”

Maddie licked her dry lips. “Does this have to do with the fact some of these dogs have been here before?”

She hadn’t talked to George about it. Bull hadn’t given her any updated information, and she couldn’t blame him, but to be honest, she was tired of waiting.

George paused and looked up at her.

She knew she was right. There was something in the way he looked at her. She wasn’t an idiot.

“What did you do?”

“Maddie, I suggest you leave this office right the fuck now. You have no idea what you’re talking about. The dogs are being moved pronto. Go and enjoy them while you still can.”

The urge to stand and fight with him was so strong, but she gritted her teeth and stepped out of his office.

“Fuck!” She stomped her foot.

She glanced around at the grounds that had once been a safe haven to her. A place that offered comfort. The chance for a real home for dogs. Now, it was something darker. Something she hated more than anything, and it was George’s fault.

She didn’t go back to the office. Hellen wouldn’t be able to cope seeing her this way. Tears filled her eyes, and she turned toward the main bulk of the kennels. With her hands locked together, she let the tears fall, trying to think of a way to stop whatever George was doing.

Maddie got to the end of the kennels, where a small dog that was suspected of being pregnant lay in the furthest corner of the kennel. She crouched down, put her hands flat against the cage, and looked at her.

“Hey, beautiful girl,” she said. “It’s...” She couldn’t bring herself to lie.

Pain shot through her back as something struck her from behind. She didn’t have time to fight back as pain rushed through every single part of her body. A voice telling her she was an interfering cunt filled her senses.

Before she could get a good look at the men who attacked her, the world went blank.

Bull glanced across the parking lot as he stared at William Ranford. The impromptu meet had been the reason for him to send Maddie off to the animal shelter, where she would be safe. He didn't need any of his enemies knowing he had a weakness, and it came in the form of a five-foot-five, long-haired brunette with curves that drove him wild.

"You hurt my brother," William said.

"Your brother had a dogfighting ring on my land. One that's connected to the local animal shelter. Believe me, he struck first." He was tense, ready to fight.

William hadn't come alone.

There were seven men at his back, all capable of making this end very badly. Bull wasn't interested in dying today. He had a woman he wanted to make his own, but he had to keep his focus.

Being prepared to die was what always gave him the edge in these kinds of meetings. Most men weren't interested in giving their lives for the cause. They had plans to fuck, to eat, to live a long fruitful life, but rarely to die.

He stared at William, unflinching.

The man before him had just as dark a reputation. He was a cruel man. He'd rid his city of the mafia presence, removed the cartel's power, and kept it all to himself. People spoke the name William Ranford with respect and fear.

Bull wasn't afraid of him. He knew this kind of play.

What he was curious about though, was how he removed the cartel problem. Out of everything his father set up for the club, the cartel was the one piece of the puzzle he'd never been able to remove. The death of the club wasn't the risk he was willing to take.

"You see that's what I hate about younger brothers," William said with a sigh.

Bull was tempted to look toward Grant. "They are known to do shit without thinking straight."

Grant didn't make a move, but everyone at the club knew what he meant. Over the years, since Bull had taken care of Grant, his little brother had been known to act without thinking. It wasn't a trait Bull was too fond of. In fact, he hated it.

“I have seen Craig. He will make a full recovery,” William said. “This business with the dogs, I don’t like it.”

“Neither do I.”

Bull knew he had William in a corner here. He was a feared and respected leader, but he had also conducted himself fairly in matters like this. Craig had fucked up big time. Carnage was Chaos and Carnage MC’s turf. The unwritten rules were clear, and no one did business without getting confirmation first. Bull hadn’t gotten any of that. By their own laws, Bull could kill Craig for what he did.

“I want to speak with you privately,” William said.

“Not going to fucking happen,” Grant said.

Bull held his hand up. He didn’t need his brother interfering in his stuff right now.

“We’ll talk.” He pointed toward the main gate. It would mean he would have to pass William’s men, but Bull wasn’t afraid. His own men would have his back.

“A brother, I take it,” William said as they were far enough away.

“Let’s just say I know what you mean about cleaning up younger brothers’ messes.”

William laughed. “Do you mind if I smoke?”

“Be my guest.” He hadn’t smoked in years. Didn’t see the benefit of it.

“I keep promising myself I will quit, but then Craig does some shit.” William took a deep draw on his cigarette. “I know about you, Bull. I heard of your reputation. Of what you’ve done to get this club back to its glory.”

Bull remained silent. He didn’t need anyone to tell him what he already knew. His father had fucked up on a grand scale, and he’d been the one to repair the damage.

“I admire that.”

He folded his arms and waited.

“I don’t want any repercussions for what my brother did. I’ve got the details that suggest he was working with the man at the animal shelter. A George something or other.” William held open his jacket. “It’s all in that file. My brother was working on his own. George had some business in the city. The two got together and started talking. He supplied the dogs, and my

brother supplied the people who'd pay to see dogs fighting." From the wrinkle of William's nose, he didn't like it.

"Not an animal person?"

"I happen to love animals. It's why I'm a vegan."

Bull raised his brow.

"Laugh all you want."

"Nah, just, a vegan crime boss. I've seen a whole lot of shit in my time, but I will grant you, this is new."

William chuckled. "I've killed men for less of an insult."

"I'm not insulting you. Thank you for this," Bull said. "Craig will not be harmed by the club, so long as he never steps foot in Carnage again."

"Good." William held out his hand.

This was the best way to do business. They would all walk free and clear.

Bull shook his hand. "You're not going to ask?" William held his hand firm.

"Ask what?" Bull didn't know what the man was talking about.

"You do your research on me, and I do it on you. We know each other's lives, and who we fuck. It's who we are. We don't conduct meetings without knowing everything."

"And?" Bull asked.

"And don't you want to know how I did it? How I got rid of my cartel problem? We all know they're all around us all the time," William said.

His eyes went wide, almost as if he was a little crazy.

"I didn't think friendly chat was up for discussion."

"Yeah, well, I feel the cartel has too much of a hold on everyone and everything. What you've got to be willing to do is fight to the death."

"Fight to the death?"

"Yeah, when I intended to take my city, the only goal was to be the last man standing. That's what I did. I took on their best men, slaughtered each and every one of them. Any time I get a sniff of cartel interference, they don't get time to talk. They're dead."

"And if you're wrong?" Bull asked.

"I've rid the world of a dangerous man or woman. Evil comes in all forms, Bull. Don't forget that."

William snapped his fingers.

Bull hadn't been willing to sacrifice Grant to rid himself of the cartel problem. He watched as William and his men climbed into their cars and drove out of town.

"Are you fucking crazy?" Grant asked, coming to his side.

"Don't."

"No, you don't get to keep silencing me. What the fuck is going on? You should have killed that bastard."

He glared at his brother. "Why? What good would that have done me?" He was getting tired of Grant questioning every single thing he did. It wasn't funny. If anything, it pissed him off.

There was no logic in killing off William. That was now how alliances and business deals were made.

"We could have taken his city," Grant said.

"You need to stop watching fantasy movies," Bull said, stepping back into the main parking lot of the garage.

He moved toward Pat, who he was more inclined to make his VP. The only reason Grant carried the patch was due to a vote. The club felt his brother should be his VP. The Chaos and Carnage was forged on Reynolds blood, and the men felt it should stay within the family, but Grant didn't have what it took to run the club. There was too much of their father in Grant's veins. Grant clearly needed to prove himself, and Bull didn't have time to beat the shit out of his brother to get him in line.

"Don't walk away from me, brother," Grant said.

Bull closed the file and turned to his brother, brows raised. "What do you want?"

"I want to contest for leadership," Grant said.

The tension in the men who were present was palpable.

They wanted Grant to be VP due to him being family, but he was in no position to take the spot as Prez. They all knew it, and Bull knew it as well.

"Be careful," Pat said.

"I don't give a fuck. You should have killed him," Grant said. "You all agree with me."

Every single man was shaking their head.

Bull put the file into Pat's arms. "You want to fight for this club, then we fight." He removed his leather cut, putting the jacket in Pat's hands as

well. "We do it here and now."

"No, we do it back at the clubhouse," Grant said.

"No, we're doing it now." He wasn't going to wait another minute to deal with his brother. Grant was always like this. Thinking he knew best. Shouting from the rooftops to be heard. Always trying to prove himself, but what for, Bull didn't fucking know.

He stepped up to his brother. "I suggest you get the first punch in, brother, because you're not going to get any more in."

Grant glared at him, and Bull waited.

"You know I'm right."

"Last chance."

He didn't fight, so Bull made it easier for him. He landed the first punch to Grant's gut, which sent him forward.

Grabbing the back of Grant's head, he gripped his hair and then landed a blow to his face.

Grant scrambled back. Blood already leaked from his lip.

Bull wasn't even out of breath as he waited. There was no way he could let Grant's threat of leadership contest slide. Any other man would have been forced to see it through. Now that Grant had even suggested he didn't trust Bull, he had to prove he was stronger, that he knew what he was doing, and that he could take care of the club.

With each blow he landed on Grant, the angrier he got. This was what he'd been trying to get Grant to not do. There was no room for them to fight. The club was supposed to belong to them.

Grant got in a few blows, but Bull was the one who wasn't out of breath, not injured, and he was pretty sure he'd cracked one of Grant's ribs.

It was only when Grant screamed that he submitted, that he had failed, that he stopped pounding on his brother.

Bull stepped back. "There is a reason you don't go killing every single person in sight. That man is a fucking legend in his city. He is known for removing his opponents by killing them. His brother was on our turf. It meant he owed us for not killing his brother. You need to learn to pick your own fucking battles."

He looked toward Rip and Bud. "Take him to the fucking doctors. Get him out of my sight."

His men went to Grant, and his brother was wise to not throw them off.

Bull turned toward Pat, who was on his cell phone. He wiped the blood from his lip. Grant had clocked him in the jaw. He'd been hit so many times that there was no pain.

"Bull, we've got to get to the hospital. Maddie was badly beaten at the animal shelter. That was Hellen."

The club tensed up, and Bull didn't think. He went to his bike, and without looking back, he headed toward the hospital.

Chapter Nine

Maddie was in a coma.

Bull sat in the hospital chair in the sterile room and watched as his woman lay in the bed, unmoving. Her face was badly bruised. She had a swollen eye, along with a few cuts to her face. One of her legs was broken, as was her arm. The wrist on another hand had also been broken.

She'd been in surgery, where they had reset the bones. She had suffered cracked ribs. The doctor had said everything was fixable. Maddie would eventually make a full recovery. The biggest concern was the coma.

Bull couldn't believe he had sent her to the animal shelter for her own safety only for her to get hurt. He was so fucking pissed off.

A knock sounded on the hospital room door. He had her moved to a private room. Maddie's insurance wouldn't have been able to pay for it, but he'd been the one to settle all the bills. She wouldn't have to worry about her recovery. Grant stood outside of the door, looking a little worse for wear.

Bull glared at him. "You can leave."

"Bull, don't be like that."

"Do you see her?" Bull asked. He leaned forward as he looked at her. It broke his heart to see her like this. "You know there is a chance she won't ever wake up." He rubbed at his face. The reality was just too much. He snorted. "She was supposed to be safe. This wasn't supposed to happen to her."

"You can't blame yourself."

He shook his head. "There's no one else to blame but me." He couldn't take his eyes off her. She looked so bruised. So helpless. Bull would have given anything for it to be him in that damn bed than Maddie. She was way too precious.

"You didn't know."

"I know something shitty is going on. I met that piece-of-shit George. The moment I met him I knew there was something off about him." He figured it was just because he showed an interest in Maddie, but now he knew differently. There was a reason he needed to trust his gut.

Grant closed the door. "We got him."

Bull turned toward his brother. He felt absolutely no remorse at the bruises that covered his brother's face. Grant had it coming.

"Good."

"He's not saying anything."

"I don't doubt for a second he will."

"Dylan wants to talk to you," Grant said.

The very thought of talking to the sheriff didn't exactly leave him feeling comforted. "Not right now."

"He needs to talk to you."

"Grant, seriously, man, back the fuck off. I don't want him or anyone else coming near me, got it?" He wasn't in a very forgiving mood.

His brother nodded his head. "Fine. I'll leave you alone."

Bull didn't argue with him.

At the door, Grant paused. "I am sorry."

"You can keep your apologies and shove them up your ass, Grant. There's going to come a time when your mouth is going to get you in trouble, and I ain't going to be there to get you out. It's time to start using your fucking head. Get the fuck out of my sight."

Grant left.

Bull reached out and took the tips of Maddie's fingers that weren't broken. "Sorry about that, babe. As you know, my brother isn't a fine gentleman." He laughed. "Not that I can say I am. I've done a lot of bad things in my time. Lots of stuff you're never going to find out. Running the club, you've got to learn to keep your conscience at the door. There's no room for it. There's not a whole lot of room for anything else."

The machines in the room beeped as they had been doing since he sat down. "I don't like this. How is it you were able to find trouble, huh? You were only taking care of a couple of dogs." He blew out a breath. His throat felt tight, and he stared up at the sterile ceiling. "The truth is, I hate hospitals. Always have. Nothing good ever came out of them. Not even Grant. He was the only one of us born in the hospital. I was born at the clubhouse. On the dirty floor. Couldn't even be bothered to go to the hospital."

He stroked her fingers, hating the feeling that surrounded him. His chest felt like it was crushing from the inside.

“You’ve got to wake up, Maddie. I’ve only just gotten you. I haven’t even gotten the chance to date you. There’s so much I want to do with you.” He smiled. “And to you, but I don’t know if you’d be ready to hear about that just yet. You’ve got a lot of stuff to catch up on, but I’ve got a whole load of experience to enjoy playing with you.”

Leaning over, he pressed a kiss to Maddie’s fingers. “Come back to me. I need you to come back to me.”

Nothing.

He gritted his teeth. “I’ve never asked for anything in this world. Not even when I took over from the club, but I’m asking now. Maddie, please, I need you to come back to me.” He wasn’t the begging kind of man. The very thought of asking anyone for anything more than once repulsed him.

There was no change in Maddie. He didn’t let her hand go.

Time ticked on by.

The nurse came and tried to kick him out of the room. She ended up leaving with tears streaming down her face. He wasn’t going to leave Maddie.

With the private room, he had an en-suite toilet, which he used when he needed to.

A knock came on the door, and he turned to see Pat holding a Styrofoam cup.

“I figured you could use some coffee. You look like shit.”

Bull took a sip of the brown liquid. He began to cough. “I don’t know what that tar is, but it’s not coffee.”

“It’s what the hospital calls coffee. I guess this is what keeps the good doctors awake all those hours.” Pat wrinkled his nose, but he kept on sipping. “You slept?”

“Nope.”

“It’s not going to make her wake up.”

“She might not wake up.”

“Get your head out of your ass. Maddie’s stronger than you think.”

“The doctors said so.”

“Doctors don’t know everything,” Pat said.

Bull wanted to believe it. He got to his feet and looked at Pat while sipping at his coffee. “Any news?”

“Not yet. William took his brother out of town. There has been no blowback from that. Grant’s taking it in turns guarding George, and he’s not talking. Hellen’s stopped by the clubhouse, wanting to know more about Maddie. Apparently she tried to come here, but no one’s letting her past.”

“That’s my fault. I ordered it,” he said.

Pat looked toward the bed.

“You think I should let Hellen in?” Bull asked.

“I checked the security footage for the whole day. Hellen didn’t leave the desk. She didn’t make any calls. At no point was she able to arrange Maddie’s attack. She’s clear, Prez.”

Bull nodded. “You think I should let her?”

“I think Hellen was the one who found her and she wants to know her friend is okay. I get that. It’s what we all would want. Isn’t it?”

He nodded. “Make the arrangements. I’m sure Maddie will like that.” He didn’t know if Maddie and Hellen were particularly close, but from the way Maddie looked, he didn’t doubt for a second that Hellen must have seen her in a much worse state.

Pat didn’t leave.

“What is it?”

“Some of the dogs are gone.”

“What?”

“The kennels were cleared out. The footage shows the men clearing the dogs from several of the kennels.”

“I need to see this footage.” He looked at Maddie. There was no way he could leave her. “Bring it here.”

“Rusty is outside with one of the prospects.”

“I’ve told you to keep the prospects out of my sight.” They had failed him. He’d given them a simple instruction, and they hadn’t been able to do that. Deep down, Bull knew they couldn’t be held responsible for what happened. Jake, the prospect who had been stationed at the shelter, had been knocked unconscious and even sedated. It was why he wasn’t down with George right now. Otherwise, Bull would have taken all his anger out on him.

“Then what about Rusty? You know the longer we leave this, the less chance you have of catching them. Maddie will wake up, and when she does, she’ll be pissed at you, Bull. You know this.”

He looked at Maddie.

Pat was right.

She loved those dogs more than anything, and if anything did happen to them while he was taking care of her, she'd never forgive herself.

He got to his feet and leaned over, brushing a part of her forehead that wasn't bandaged up. "I'll be back. Rusty will take care of you."

The machines beeped in response, and he fucking hated it. Hospitals were the worst.

Against his better judgment, he left the room and found Rusty and Jake outside.

Jake looked like shit. The sedative they'd given him had made him throw up and hadn't reacted well with his body. His face was also bruised. He tensed up the moment he caught sight of him, and Bull held himself stiff. To take out Maddie's pain on this kid would be a mistake.

He looked toward Rusty. "Keep an eye on her. If she so much as twitches or exhales, or anything, you call me."

"Got it, Prez," Rusty said.

"Kid, you keep an eye on the door. Don't fuck this up."

With that, he turned on his heel and made his way outside of the hospital. He passed so many doctors and patients, but all he could think about was Maddie. She shouldn't be in the hospital, and it was only him, a few guys at the club, and Hellen, who seemed to care about her.

In the past two days, Bull had come to realize something. Maddie had absolutely no one. She had no friends. No colleagues. No family. She was completely alone in the world, and he was determined to show her that wasn't the case. She would never be alone again.

She had him, and by extension, she would also have the club.

His bike wasn't parked too far from the entrance to the hospital. Straddling the bike, he took the second he usually did to enjoy the purr of his engine, but it wasn't the same. Nothing was the same with Maddie hurt.

He'd never cared about a woman before in his life. Gripping the handlebars, he took off, heading toward the shelter. Pat kept up with him. Bull didn't slow down once.

Bull hadn't lived like a saint. Even when he would notice Maddie, and he'd been noticing her for a long time, close to ten years. When he first saw her, really saw her, he figured she'd stop by at the clubhouse at some

point and he'd get the chance to know her then. It never happened. Maddie never came to the clubhouse.

There were a few occasions he saw her around town, but he often kept his distance. She'd been an enigma to him. Now, he couldn't lose her. Not when he nearly had her.

Arriving at the animal shelter, he saw the gates had been closed.

Pat joined him seconds later. "We've changed the locks and the codes." He stood in front of the gate and typed in the new code that would gain them access.

Bull wasn't interested in all the small details of the moment. All he wanted to do was find out as much information as possible, so he could rescue the dogs for Maddie and get her to wake up from her fucking coma.

They went straight to the main reception where Hellen was working. She looked so frantic. Pat whispered to him about the dog she had tried to adopt that had also been taken.

Made sense. The woman was attached to that dog.

"How is she?" Hellen asked.

"She's still in a coma."

"I ... I'm so sorry. Nothing like this has ever happened before. I didn't know what to do," Hellen said.

"You did the right thing." She had called the ambulance and then alerted the club. That was all she could have done. "When you finish here, you can go and see her." Bull didn't like the idea of sharing Maddie with anyone.

"I can?" She smiled. "Thank you."

Bull didn't linger. He nodded at Pat to move on, tired of this already. All he wanted to do was handle business and get back to his woman.

Pat took him to the back room where there were two computer screens.

"Two screens?" he asked.

"With only eight security cameras throughout the whole of the building. Either it was done on purpose, and only as a light safety measure, or they figured they would never need to have tight security at an animal shelter."

"What are your thoughts?" Bull asked.

With Pat's years of service for his country, Bull trusted the man's gut and his opinion. If he had doubts, he believed him.

"I think this is the case for both. I reckon George is a tight ass and didn't want to spend the necessary cash on more cameras. I also think he saw a big pie, if you know what I mean. The dogs made good cash. We're looking into George's finances, and he was in debt up to his eyeballs."

"Gambling?"

"Not even close. This place was draining him dry. It didn't even start out as his either, which was new."

"Inherited?"

"Yep. An elderly couple in their eighties originally set it up. It was a place for people who had made a bad decision when buying a dog. They would offer a home until they found a forever home for the pets. It was quite an extensive selection process. The couple knew what they were doing, and at the time, George was a young vet. He helped them a lot, and I'm guessing they figured he was a like-minded soul."

"Only he was all about the money."

"Every cent," Pat said.

Bull folded his arms across his chest. He hadn't looked deep enough into George and he wasn't willing to make that mistake again. "Play the tapes."

"You know none of this is your fault."

"I don't want to talk about blame."

"But you do blame yourself," Pat said.

Bull pointed at the screen. "Just play the tapes." He didn't need his men attempting to pity him. He was a big boy and knew what he'd done wrong.

Pat shook his head but leaned forward and clicked on the keyboard. Bull had never been into computers. He'd always been a hands-on kind of guy. The computer generation weirded him out. People spent way too much time attached to their phones, and just by thinking that, he knew he was getting way too old.

The screen lit up, and it showed Maddie.

She looked ... troubled.

Pat clicked the keyboard, and the screen froze. "Do you want me to fast forward this part?"

“No. Let it play. I need to see this.”

“Prez?”

“I said press fucking play.” He was going to see how he failed his woman. Maddie stood looking in a cage. The men approached from behind, and she didn’t even see it coming. Each blow she took sickened Bull, but it was what he needed to see. When he caught the men responsible, they were all going to suffer. Especially the one who kicked her once she was out cold and bleeding out.

“Any sound?” Bull asked.

“None.”

“Fucking cheap-ass motherfucker.” He wasn’t happy.

Bull watched as the men opened ten kennels. Some of the dogs they were taking weren’t even the ones that had been found at the dogfighting site. Just the sight of the men hitting the dogs and dragging them across the ground toward the back of the shelter pissed him off.

“I’ve seen enough. I want you to get to Dylan. Ask him about the security cameras leading onto the street. They’re not going to walk those dogs through any woods or take them where they can be seen. There must have been a car or something.”

“Where are you going?”

“To see the guy who will have answers about our newfound friends.” Bull took off. He didn’t stop when Hellen called out to him either. He left the shelter and climbed back on his bike, not taking the time to admire his beast in action. Riding out, he went straight to the clubhouse.

He had one focus on mind, and that was to find the men responsible for hurting his woman, and now, George had to pray for a miracle.

Most of the club sluts were outside, sitting on the walls and smoking a cigarette. When he arrived, many of them stood and tried to wriggle their tits, as if that would call to him. He wasn’t interested in any of them.

He parked his bike and took off into the clubhouse.

Several of his men were seated, and once he arrived, they immediately got their feet, but again, he wasn’t interested.

Heading down toward the basement, he saw Grant, playing on his cell phone. His brother closed his cell and stood.

“Bull,” he said.

“Go upstairs and give me and George some private time.”

“Do you want any help?” Grant asked.

“No. This is something I’ve got to do alone.”

There was a high chance George wasn’t making it home to dinner tonight. The rage inside Bull was something he hadn’t felt in a long time. Not since he realized the full extent of his father’s near destruction of the club.

Hands clenched into fists, he looked at George secured to a single chair within the basement. There was no sign of him pissing himself, so he’d been granted the luxury of bathroom breaks. They weren’t a fucking spa.

Bull moved toward the metal chair, grabbed it, and dragged it all the way across the stone floor. When he was a kid, the ground used to be covered with cement. He spent a lot of time down here playing cops and robbers with a few imaginary friends. His dad had always told him not to be down here, and one day, he discovered why.

He must have been six or seven. Not too old to be playing with imaginary friends, but not young enough to not remember. He’d been playing, hiding between the boxes and some of the stacks. The basement was where they kept everything from broken chairs, to old radios, to other trinkets that held no value to a kid just playing. He’d been the cop. Much to his dad’s annoyance, in his games, he’d always played the good guy. It was only as he got older that he realized he was going to be the bad guy in every single situation. He’d been down there for easily three hours, if not more, when the door opened. Now, his dad had told him to stop coming to the basement. Had even gone so far as to say it was haunted by bad men who liked to chase little boys to stop them playing.

Bull hadn’t believed him. He’d explored every single inch of that basement. There were no ghosts or evil spirits lurking. Just lots of spider webs and a few rats Bull hadn’t wanted to kill.

Compared to his father, he’d been considered a weird kid.

The door had opened, and his dad hadn’t been coming down to give him a beating. His dad had figured he would listen to what he said.

Bull hadn’t.

Even to this day, he didn’t know who they had brought down, or what he had done to deserve the beating and death that had been given to him. His dad never knew he was down in the basement. Never knew that he

heard the man beg for his life while he was laughed at. It was the last day Bull had ever gone to the basement for fun and games. In fact, it was the last day Bull had played.

He'd grown up that day.

"I don't know anything. You cannot keep me here," George said.

Bull's hand clenched into a fist, and he slammed it across George's face. He was a strong man, and from the single blow, he knew he'd hurt George. Bull was aware of the sheer strength he possessed. No one could rival him.

For many years after that basement incident, Bull had vowed never to be a man in some guy's basement, to be the hardest motherfucker around, and he'd succeeded at it all.

"That is the last and only lie that will spill from your lips while we're here, you got it?"

"Are you fucking crazy?" George asked. "This cannot be happening. You can't do this to me."

"I don't see anyone coming to claim you, George. Now, I know you're just a kind vet who helps out a load of animals for you to feel all warm and fuzzy, but that's not the case. You went to that fucker. You're the one who set up the dogfighting ring, and you're going to tell me what the fuck happened. Who your contacts are, and you're going to give me the directions to the men who beat up Maddie, or else it's not going to end well for you."

"I can't help you," George said. "They'll kill me."

"You think this is going to be fun for you?" Bull got up and walked across the room. He found a dinner tray. The kind kids had in high school at lunch breaks. He picked it up, walked across the room, and used it across George's face. This time, he did hold back. The idea wasn't to kill him, at least not yet, but it was to hurt him and scare him.

The image of Maddie broken, on the floor, hurt and bleeding, played across his mind. With that, he wrapped his fingers around George's throat and squeezed. It would be so easy to end his life. To rid the world of another piece of maggot flesh that didn't deserve to live.

But he needed answers. Bull let him go.

George had already started to piss himself, crying. It was a shame. Bull had gotten so good at torturing people. He enjoyed taking the time,

getting all creative in how to bring the maximum amount of pain.

“Please. Stop. I will tell you everything,” George said.

“Everything?”

George nodded.

Bull smiled. “And here I was thinking you were going to play hard to get. See. I’m always fair to those who offer me a good deal. Now tell me everything you know and don’t leave a single little thing out.”

George started to talk, and Bull listened to his little tale. He didn’t know for sure if he was telling the truth, but he at least had something to work on, and that was all he needed right that moment.

Chapter Ten

The odd beep.

Maddie turned her head left, then right. Or was it right then left? She frowned. Why was everything a little fuzzy? She heard a noise. Something echoed.

Opening her eye, she saw that the world was still blur, but she could only see out of one eye. That made no sense. She closed her eyes again and tried to open both. She felt like she was opening them but could only see out of one.

What was going on?

Her body ... was a little numb.

She lifted her arm, and it felt like a dead weight. It was in a cast. One of her legs was also elevated.

“Get a doctor.”

Maddie knew that sound. She turned her head to see Bull. That was it.

“Maddie, can you hear me?”

She reached up to touch Bull, but he captured her hand.

“It’s okay. Can you talk? Do you remember anything? What day is it?”

Why was he asking her so many questions?

She opened her mouth and tried to speak, but it hurt. Her mouth felt so dry. “Water?”

“Water.” Bull let go of her hand, and the next thing she knew, he held a straw against her lips. She took it and began to suck. Water hit her stomach, and she was grateful. Her throat still felt like it was sore, but it wasn’t painful. He moved the water away and touched her hand once again.

She liked him holding her hand.

Hellen came into the room, followed by a man and a woman.

“Maddie, it’s Doctor Sinclair,” he said.

“And I’m Doctor James,” the woman said.

“Where am I?”

“What does this mean?” Bull asked.

“Amnesia can be a possible side effect from the ... from what happened.” The doctor came close to her, and Maddie stared at him.

As he pulled out a small light, she was struck by everything. The pain exploded inside her head, and she remembered being punched, kicked, even spat on. All of it came rushing back, and along with it, the noise of the machines as they started to beep.

“Maddie, you need to calm down.”

She had been beaten up. The dogs. They had gone for the dogs.

“Fucking move,” Bull said.

She didn’t know how he did it, but he had the doctors out of the way, and he was there, right in front of her face.

“Maddie, it’s me. It’s Bull. You remember me?”

She nodded, but she couldn’t do anything more.

“That’s good. That’s so good. You remember what happened to you?”

Again, she nodded.

“I got them,” he said. “The dogs are safe. I got them back, and they are going to want to meet you, but first, you’re going to have to let these doctors look at you. You need to calm down. Do you think you can do that for me?”

Maddie nodded. It was all she could do.

“Good. I’m not going anywhere.”

“Stay!” She didn’t want him to go anywhere.

“Yes. I will stay.”

She hated hospitals so much.

The doctors got to work asking her so many questions, and in the process, they gave her a headache. They asked her about the pain levels. What she remembered. They mentioned the sheriff, but Bull took over and said she would do what she could and take her time. She was grateful to him for sticking up for her. She didn’t know how much more she could cope with. All their questions just seemed too much.

By the time they left, she was so exhausted.

Hellen was across the room, tears in her eyes.

“I’m so glad you’re okay. I had no idea they could get in around the back. I called an ambulance as soon as I found you.”

“It’s fine.”

Hellen smiled. “I’m going to go and let Beatrice know. She and Carl wanted to stop by, but Bull said the fewer visitors you had, the better. I’m so glad you’re okay.”

Maddie forced a smile and watched as Hellen left.

"Do you want me to get rid of her?" Bull asked. "I can see she's stressing you out."

She turned toward Bull. "You got the dogs?"

"Yes."

"I couldn't ... stop them."

"I know. They were fucking cowards. I got them back. The dogs are safe. I'm pretty sure they're missing you. Just so you know, the one you were watching, she gave birth to ten pups."

"Ten?"

"Yes, and Pat made sure they all made it as well. There was a little guy, I think of him as a runt, he was way too small, but Pat wouldn't let anything happen to him."

Maddie sighed. "Thank you."

"You do care for those dogs, don't you?"

"They have done nothing wrong, you know? All they want is to give you love and to be loved." She tried to shrug, but her whole body was on fire. "How long have I been here?"

"Two weeks. You've been in a coma. You have also been in surgery, and you will make a full recovery."

Maddie looked at her body. "I don't know how I'm going to be able to cope with this."

"You're coming with me, back to my place."

"Your place at the clubhouse?" she asked.

Bull smirked. "No, but if you wanted to go to the clubhouse, we could. I have a house not too far from the clubhouse. It's set back from the road. Grant lives there, unfortunately, but he does spend most of his time at the club, so you won't have to panic."

"I don't want to impose. I'm sure I can find someone who can stop by my house." She had never suffered a single broken bone in her life. As a kid, she wasn't exactly an explorer.

"Maddie, you're not imposing when I'm the one telling you that I'm going to be taking care of you."

"Don't you have ... other things to do? What about your girlfriend?"

He cupped her cheek. "Are you telling me right now that you don't remember us talking about you and me?"

"I do remember."

"Then it's not up for discussion. When the doctors say you can leave, I'll be the one to take care of you."

She took a breath. "I don't want to stay here."

"Not a fan of hospitals?"

"I hate them."

"You and me both. I can't stand them." He moved the chair closer, and she turned her head, wanting to move her body toward him, but unable to.

"I'm here. I'm not going anywhere."

"You stayed here for me?"

"Yeah, I did."

"Why?"

"You're a special person, Maddie. One day, I hope you see it." He looked toward the door. "Hellen has been here every single chance she had. She's had her hands full looking after the shelter."

"What about George?"

"No one can find him. He's done a runner from what we could see. The guy was in some serious debt. He was taking money from the shelter. When you first look at it, it looks like the shelter is actually killing him, but between the regular donations and money-raising projects you're all part of, that shelter would pay for itself."

Maddie knew something wasn't quite right. "He was taking the money for himself?"

"George had a fancy life. A house he couldn't afford. Cars. Even down to his grocery shopping. The shelter wasn't giving him enough money as he still had to pay fees for the care and upkeep of the place."

"I should have known."

"Babe, you're not superwoman."

"And he's just gone?" Maddie asked. "Left?"

Bull nodded, but he didn't look at her.

She wasn't a fool. "Was he responsible for what happened?" Maddie asked.

"He had ... bad investments. The dogs were helping him to fund his lifestyle."

She knew Bull had killed him. If he hadn't killed him, then he would do it soon.

"So it's all over."

"It's all over."

"Good. I'm glad."

"And the dogs, they're ... fine."

"Yes. The dogs are doing fine. Hellen is looking for someone to take over at the shelter. She said that she preferred to volunteer. She was too old to deal with the stress of the place."

"We'll find someone," Maddie said. "When I can, I will help her."

There was a knock at the door. Pat entered after Bull called out to him.

"You are awake," Pat said. He moved toward the bed and looked at her. "I would give you a hug."

"But I look a little worse for wear, I get it," she said. "Are those flowers for me?"

"You got it."

She smiled. "You're sweet."

It had taken Pat a little time to open up to her, to even talk to her in a conversation mode. This was great progress. He was a good guy at heart, with a lot of demons.

Pat didn't stay for too long. He put the flowers in a vase next to her bed, and out of the corner of her eye, she could see them. Hellen arrived and told her Beatrice and Carl wanted to come and see her.

Bull had said no more visitors, and he even made Hellen and Pat leave. She watched as he called the doctor into the room, and she couldn't help but love him at that moment as he started to talk about letting her get out of here.

She hated the hospital so much and didn't want to stay any longer than she had to. The doctor didn't think it was good for her to leave straight away, but with a few days of observation, he was willing to release her into Bull's care.

It was a good day and a good feeling.

It was an additional week before Maddie was in any kind of position to leave the hospital. The doctors constantly checked her blood work, made

sure she was recovering. There were X-rays to be taken, as well as a few observations they made. Bull didn't understand half of what they wanted to do, but finally, Doctor Sinclair was the one who was happy to let her go home, providing he could make additional house calls.

So by Friday, he had Maddie all packed up, and the van was downstairs waiting. He had her prescriptions stuffed away in a bag, and she was in a wheelchair. With the extent of the damage to her wrist, she couldn't use crutches.

The doctor had warned that he was going to have to be responsible for her care and her subsequent rehabilitation. He would stop by once a week to give him an update on when she would be able to start physical therapy. Bull already had a woman in mind to come to the house. There was no way he was going to allow a nice young doctor to get attached to Maddie. She was all his, and now he had her in his home.

"Are you sure you're ready to leave?" Doctor James asked.

"I'm good," Maddie said. "It seems ridiculous wasting a bed for someone who needs it. I can heal at Bull's house."

Doctor James nodded. "I can't stop Doctor Sinclair from changing his decision. If anything changes. Dizziness or you feel drowsy, you will come straight back."

"I will."

The doctor left, somewhat reluctantly.

"Do you think we should get a second opinion?" Maddie asked. "She doesn't look happy at the thought of letting me leave."

"Do you want to stay?" Bull asked. He'd made all the arrangements for her to leave and had been sure that Sinclair knew she had to be healthy enough to move.

"No, I really don't. Please, get me out of here."

He was more than happy to oblige. Gripping the handles of the wheelchair, he started to move her out of the room. They made their way across the corridor. Several nurses stopped by to wish her well on her recovery.

Maddie seemed to make people happy wherever she went. He didn't understand why she was so closed off to the people in town. No one ever had anything bad to say about her, apart from his brother, but Grant didn't count.

“There were a lot of people there,” Maddie said.

“I’ve got you.” He leaned over and clicked the button for the main floor. He put a hand on her shoulder in an attempt to offer her comfort.

She sighed and put hers on top of his. The one hand that wasn’t broken. “Thank you.”

“I’ve got you, Maddie.”

The elevator doors opened up, and he pushed her across the main floor, heading toward the doors. There was a couple entering and seeing him, clocking his leather cut, they held the door open for him.

Pat and Rusty were waiting by the curb with the van. Pat pulled the side door open, and Rusty climbed into the front seat.

“Your carriage awaits,” Pat said.

With Pat’s help, they lifted the wheelchair, all the while Maddie was telling them to get a ramp or something. They got the wheelchair into the back of the car and secured it so it wouldn’t move.

“Are you staying in back?” Pat asked.

“Yep.”

“I can sit in a chair,” Maddie said.

Bull climbed into the back of the van just as it started up.

“Isn’t this dangerous?” Maddie asked. “I can move, you know.”

“Not without hurting yourself.”

He and Pat had taken a great deal of time to arrange bringing Maddie to his home. Each option of moving Maddie only seemed to cause her more pain. To move her from the wheelchair to the van, they had a high risk factor of banging her leg or wrist. It was easier to take the whole wheelchair into the van, drive her to his place, and then take her out, and wheel her up to his house, to a ramp they’d already installed.

“Don’t worry. The guys will go slow.”

“I can’t believe you did all of this for me. It’s so ... wow,” she said.

He smiled. “Charmed?”

“A little bit. I think.”

He chuckled.

“When will I get to meet the dogs?” Maddie asked.

“Very soon.” He had gotten all the dogs back. They had been transported back to the dogfighting facility. The men hadn’t known he had

eyes everywhere, and the moment they showed up, he knew. It hadn't taken a genius to figure it all out.

George had lasted as long as it took him to get the dogs back, and to pay the men back in kind.

It had been a long couple of days. The only ones that he hadn't been by Maddie's side, but she'd been on his mind. She didn't need to know how he had smashed their knees with a crowbar, or hurt them for many hours, having them all pray for death, only to grant it when he was bored.

He still believed he'd given them an easy death. If he had the time, they would still be alive, but he hadn't wanted to be anywhere else but at the hospital. The garage was getting backed up with work as well. His only focus had been on Maddie. Retribution and Maddie.

Once he took care of the men directly responsible for Maddie, George had come next. The basement's floor had been painted red. His body had been disposed of, and he'd taken a long hot shower and changed before he headed back to the hospital.

The van moved slowly. Again, this was what he and Pat had organized.

"When do you think everything will return to normal?" she asked.

"Maddie, don't rush it."

"I'm not."

"I can already see you wanting to move on to walking and using your hand again. You will, okay? But you don't need to rush anything. I've got you."

She smiled. "I guess you are starting to know me."

"I get you." He put his hand on her knee. The one that wasn't injured. "I hate that I wasn't there for you."

"Don't do that," she said. "You can't blame yourself for what happened. You're not responsible for those guys doing what they did. It's all on them and I'm not going to let you take the blame." She put her hand on his. "You stayed at the hospital with me. You cared enough to be there for me. That's enough."

He could easily argue with her, but he chose not to.

She didn't need him arguing about useless points. It didn't take too long for the van to come to a stop.

Within seconds, Pat was opening the van's door, and then with his assistance, Bull helped to pull the wheelchair out, for her to finally get a good look at his house.

He lived about a ten minutes' walk from the clubhouse. It was set back from the road so no one could find him easily. All of his mail was sent to the clubhouse. This was his only safe haven. The only good thing his father did was not to tell a single soul about where they lived. His old man had valued his privacy just as much as he'd valued money.

After he removed his father, he'd gotten to work on building the house from the ground up. It had taken a lot of work and man-hours.

No one but the men he invited from the club were allowed inside his home. Maddie would be the first woman he brought back. She would be the only woman allowed on his property. He already had it arranged for her physical therapist to go to the clubhouse rather than come here.

"Bull, your home is ... it's beautiful."

The grounds still had a lot of work to be done. There was a tarmac pavement leading up to the small steps going onto the porch in front of his house.

To the side was the ramp he'd gotten installed for her wheelchair. On either side of the tarmac was grass. He didn't fancy himself a gardener, and any spark of color came from the trees that surrounded his property and any flowers the birds brought with them.

"It's a work in progress."

"You need any help, Prez?" Rusty asked.

Pat merely waited for instructions.

"No, you boys head back to the clubhouse. I'll call you if I need anything." He pushed the wheelchair toward his home, going to the ramp and moving up toward the front door.

After pulling his key out of his jacket pocket, he slid it inside the lock, twisted, and opened the door.

He pushed her across the threshold. The first and only woman to see inside his home.

"Would you like to take a tour?" he asked.

"I'd love to. Er, not to spoil anything, but what's happening with my apartment? I go month-by-month rental."

Bull moved and pointed toward the corner. "I had no idea your rental payment was up for renewal. Your landlord did apologize for acting hasty, but he had a long list of people who want to rent from him, and so he had no choice but to ... remove your stuff." He wouldn't tell Maddie that he had also paid a little visit to her landlord and paid him a hefty price to tell her that exact same story.

There was a couple who had moved into Maddie's apartment, but the landlord hadn't heard about her accident. He'd made an appearance at the garage, where Pat had called him and asked him what to do.

Bull already had a plan to keep her all to himself, and so, he'd simply implemented it a lot sooner.

"Oh," Maddie said. "That ... fucking sucks." She pressed a hand to her mouth. "I can't believe I just said that."

He chuckled. "It's okay, babe, you get it out of your system."

"I'm just ... that fucking asshole. I pay him on time every single month and he does this. Ugh! I could scream. I'm so sorry."

"Go right ahead."

She took a deep breath and shook her head. "You know what, no. I'm not going to do it. He's not worth it. Ugh. I can't believe him. I'm going to have to look for a place to stay."

"Babe, why don't you just stay here?"

Her face went bright red. "I, er, I didn't realize that was on, er, offer."

"Why wouldn't it be?" he asked.

She looked down at her lap. "You're taking care of me. Living together, it means something slightly more, and we don't know if we can, you know, we can live together. You don't think we're moving a little too fast?"

She was cute when she was nervous. He pressed a kiss to her temple. "Then how about we find out?"

"I've never done anything like this. I've never lived with anyone."

"Maddie, babe, I think I got that with the revelation that you've never had a decent fuck."

She gasped. "Don't say that."

"What? You want me to lie? I'm only speaking the truth. We both know you've never had a decent fuck. Let's be completely honest, you

don't know how good I am in bed, but believe me, these hands are pure magic. I am going to blow your mind."

She pressed a hand to her forehead. "I can't believe this is happening."

He kissed her cheek. "Believe it, baby."

Bull gave her a tour of the whole of the downstairs, pointing out the living room, dining room, and kitchen. Then he opened the door to his study and the laundry room, and they went out back. Due to how active his dogs could be around a new person, he had left them at the clubhouse until Maddie would be able to take the impact of his dogs.

Once he finished with the downstairs, he wheeled the chair to the bottom of the stairs and put the locks on.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm taking you upstairs," he said.

She held her hand up as he went to pick her up. "No, not happening. You can't."

"I can't what?"

"You can't lift me up. I won't let you."

He put his hands on his hips as he looked at her. "Why the hell not?"

She looked down at herself. "Look at me, Bull. You cannot lift me. I am far too heavy for you to do this."

He had heard enough. Lifting her in his arms, he heard her scream.

"If you wriggle, there's a chance I'm going to drop you."

"Oh, God, you're going to drop me. This is insane. I'm too big for you to lift like this."

She was ... slightly heavy, but he didn't mind.

Bull carried her upstairs and placed her into the wheelchair that he'd left upstairs.

"You got a second wheelchair?" she asked.

"Yes. I won't be carrying you up and downstairs for long. I'm having one of those electric chairs installed so I can put you in that for safety reasons, and then carry you all the way upstairs to this chair. I have thought of everything here."

He went to move behind her, but she grabbed his hand.

"Thank you."

"You don't need to thank me."

The moment she was well and had no need for assistance, he was going to remove it all. Bull had a whole lot of plans when it came to Maddie. He just needed to have a little more patience to implement them all.

Chapter Eleven

"I'm here, Maddie. I'm here."

Maddie jolted awake to Bull leaning over her. She stopped thrashing as she looked into his green eyes. He must have turned on the light because she had fallen asleep in the dark. She had been at his house for a few days, and each night, it had been the same. She woke up with him close, almost shaking her awake.

Tears filled her eyes as he helped her to sit up. He perched on the edge of the bed. She put a hand to her racing heart, trying to calm herself down.

The nightmares made no sense. She hadn't experienced them quite as badly at the hospital.

Alone in this room, she felt the fear crushing her, which she hated because she hadn't been aware of what was happening. She had never seen the attack coming. She could only recall the pain and the few words telling her she had it coming.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"You don't need to apologize." He rested his hand on her thigh.

"I think ... maybe I should find a place so you can get some sleep or something."

"Not happening," he said. "You think this bothers me?"

"Me waking you up screaming, yeah, I think it does."

He laughed. "No, it doesn't. This isn't the worst way I've been woken up, believe me."

Her gaze landed on the scar next to his lip and wondered what had.

"Yeah, that wasn't so much fun, and I'd take you screaming the house down over this," he said, pointing at his lip.

"I didn't mean to stare."

"You don't have to keep apologizing." He stroked her thigh. She liked his touch so much. Even as her heart raced from fear, another feeling worked its way up, taking over. "Do you want me to get you anything? Hot chocolate? Water? Vodka?"

She laughed. "No alcohol. Er, I don't suppose you would ... stay with me?"

“Yeah, sure.” He glanced around the room, then got up off the bed and moved toward the chair.

“No. No. I meant ... here.” She put her hand on the bed. “With me.”

“You want me to sleep with you?”

“You’re right. I shouldn’t be asking. I’m so sorry.”

“Maddie, I don’t like to repeat myself.”

She looked at him, a little confused, and then it dawned on her what he meant. “Right, you don’t like to repeat yourself. You noticed how you keep saying that?”

He didn’t answer.

“Yes, I’d really like for you to sleep with me in this bed, if you don’t mind, that is,” she said. She was almost afraid to ask if he did.

“No problem.” He got to his feet, rounded the bed, and climbed in beside her.

“I’ve never shared a bed with a man before.” The truth just blurted out before she could stop it.

“Then it’s an honor to be your first.”

She couldn’t help but wonder what other firsts he was going to be.

Get your head out of the gutter. It’s not going to happen, not with how badly you look.

She tried to stop her mother’s voice from echoing through her mind, but it was pointless. “*No one is going to want a fat woman in their bed. You need to learn to lose the weight, Maddie. It’s bad enough that you’re not pretty like all of those other girls.*”

“Hey!” Bull cupped her face. “Where did you go?”

“I didn’t go anywhere,” she said.

“Could have fooled me.” He stroked his thumb across her lip, and she stared into his beautiful eyes. Even with the scar, he was a handsome man. Not like the boy next door, but slightly more dangerous, sexy even. “Tell me what happened.”

“I was just thinking about my mom, and she was never the nicest of people.”

“You’ve told me she didn’t mince her words.”

“Do you think parents are supposed to find their kids pretty?” she asked. “Not in a sexual way, but ... I don’t know, supportive.”

“I don’t have any kids, Maddie.”

“I know. I know.” She laughed. “My mom would always tell me how fat and ugly I was.” She blew out a breath. “Well, I guess if anyone is going to tell you the truth, it’s going to be your parents.” She hated how pitiful she must sound.

Bull didn’t let her go. He continued to hold her cheek. She’d dropped her gaze down to his very naked chest. With the nightmare, she hadn’t even noticed he wasn’t wearing any clothes, and he was a sight to behold.

Her mother would be screaming from the rooftops if she saw him now. Ink covered every inch of his skin, and it looked so ... spectacular. She could never get any tattoo because of her fear of needles, and in the past couple of weeks, she had more than enough to last her a lifetime.

“Your mother was a fucking asshole.”

“You shouldn’t speak ill of the dead.”

“If she was here, I’d tell her straight she wasn’t fit to be a parent.”

“You don’t have to say those kinds of things to me, Bull. I know I’m ... me.” She frowned. “I think I’m tired. I shouldn’t have said anything.”

“Maddie, don’t believe the shit everyone tells you, okay? You’re beautiful and sexy.”

“My mom isn’t the only one who told me, Bull. You were there to see one of my dates conveniently not make it. I’ve been told more than once by people that I’m not beautiful. I’m not what men want—”

Before she could say anything more, Bull slammed his lips down on hers. Maddie stared at him, a little taken aback, but at the realization of how good his mouth felt on hers, she couldn’t help but close her eyes.

His tongue traced over her lips. The action took her by surprise, and she opened her mouth. Bull plundered inside, and she moaned, tasting him for what felt like the first time. She couldn’t touch him. Her good hand was on the bed, keeping her propped up.

Bull’s hand slowly moved behind her head, sinking into her hair. He gripped the length in his fist, and she gasped. It wasn’t in pain, but in pleasurable arousal. Her nipples pebbled and her pussy grew slick.

She had never been kissed like this before. Even the ones she shared with Bull didn’t begin to compare to this. She was on fire, and she didn’t want it to stop.

He nudged her to the bed, and she had no choice but to fall back.

Bull broke the kiss, pecking her on the lips one final time as he looked down at her. "You're not what other men want because you are all mine, Maddie. You're perfect for me and only me."

"Why are you saying that?" she asked.

"It's the truth, and you know it. I set your world on fire with a single kiss. Don't you wonder what it would be like if you allowed yourself to fall for me?"

"I don't know what to do."

"Let yourself fall. Trust me. I will catch you. I will always catch you."

"I'm fat."

"No, you're curvy." He swiped away the tear that fell. "And I love your fucking body, Maddie." The hand on her face slowly moved down. He traced across her throat, stopping for a few seconds at her pulse before gliding down toward her breasts. She gasped as the tips of his fingers grazed across her tits.

The touch was so light at first, almost as if she imagined it.

They shouldn't be doing this. She looked a mess. The bruises were still present on her face and her body, but his hands, they were like magic, setting her aflame.

"I can't wait to have you completely naked beneath me, Maddie. I will show you how a real man deals with a woman like you." He palmed her breast, and she gasped, arching up into his touch. "You're so fucking untouched. I can't believe how long I've waited for this." He kissed her again at the same time he massaged her breast. "I want you so badly."

She whimpered.

He growled. "Fuck. I can't do this with you right now."

If she was within her senses, she would completely understand why he couldn't fuck her. His touch had sent her over the edge, and any sensible thought escaped her.

"Why not?" she asked.

"Because when I do finally fuck you, Maddie, you're going to enjoy every single second of it. Not while you're in pain and can't have the full force of me. I can be gentle when you need me to be, but your first time, I think you need it hard, fast, and for you to be screaming my name by the end of it."

She wanted that so much. “How do you do that?”

“What?”

“Make me want something I didn’t even know I did?” she asked.

He chuckled. “Because you have wanted it, Maddie. What you’ve been doing is pretending you don’t.” He stroked her cheek. “I don’t know what those other men were thinking, but I’m glad they turned their back on you.”

“Why?”

“They’re never going to get a chance to know how good you are. That’s why.” He kissed her lips again. She could gladly spend all day with him kissing her, but that wasn’t going to happen. “You need to sleep before I’m too tempted to go back on my word.”

She would be more than happy for him to go back on his word and said so.

“In time, babe. In time.”

He moved her so that she faced away from him. His large, strong hands ran down her body, captured her hips, and nestled her ass right against his dick. She felt the length of him as he pressed against her.

“Sleep,” he said.

As if it was so easy to do with just one instruction.

She licked her lips. “Why don’t you ever want to talk about your scar?” Maddie couldn’t help it. she wanted to know everything about him. Every single detail if that was possible.

He tensed behind her, his arm tightening around her. “It was club business, Maddie.”

“And I can’t know about it?”

“It’s best if you don’t know everything that went on at the club. For your own safety.”

“Is it dangerous?”

He sighed.

“I’m sorry. I just want to know everything about you. I’ve never had a chance to know someone before, and you’re a difficult man to get to know, Bull. Ignore me.” She forced her eyes closed and began to count sheep, trying to find the easiest way to fall asleep, even though sleep was the last thing on her mind.

“My dad used to call the shots. He was Prez of the club, but his greed got in the way. He made a lot of bad decisions. Nearly killed every single one of us in his search to gain power.”

“But you took over?”

“I had no choice. Grant was nearly killed because of decisions the old man made. I was there when half the club was put in danger. When you’re dealing with men’s lives, seeing them willing to die for you, I couldn’t sit back and allow that to happen. They trusted him, and now, they trust me. I would never put them in harm’s way. My dad didn’t care so long as there was enough money in it.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“The scar on my lips is a constant reminder to stay grounded. I got it while fighting for power. I won the club and got them out of most of the shit my father had embroiled us into.”

“Most of it?”

“Yeah, there are some things my father started that I couldn’t stop. For that, I will hate him forever.”

“Where is he?”

“Dead. Where he belongs.”

She nodded.

Not once did his arm leave his side.

He’d killed his father to take the club. To help people. To save them. She didn’t know how she knew this, just a feeling deep inside her gut. Bull was capable of many things. She wasn’t naïve, nor a fool. She had a hunch he had something to do with George’s sudden disappearance and why he knew no one would ever hurt her again.

Bull had the power to do so much damage. What Maddie wasn’t sure of was why she wasn’t terrified of him.

“Put your foot inside. Then your other foot. That’s right. Okay. Let me help you.”

Maddie’s face was bright red, but Bull wasn’t going to risk her falling again. The physical therapist had decided to make an early appointment yesterday, and in Maddie trying to be self-sufficient, she had fallen.

She hated him seeing her body and tried to cover her thighs as he pulled up the sweatpants.

“I can do this.”

“You can’t.”

“I know I messed up the other day, but give me another chance.”

“I’ve given you plenty of chances. Not happening. You’re not going to hurt yourself and that’s all I’m going to say on that. Got it?”

“You’re not being fair,” Maddie said.

“You’re cute when you’re angry. Also, have you seen how red you are? Can I say that I cannot wait until these delicious thighs are wrapped around my waist?”

She gasped. “Stop doing that.”

“Doing what? Telling you how your body makes me feel?”

“No one wants this.” With her good hand, she squeezed the flesh of her thigh. “I know this. Believe me.”

“Then I guess I’m a no one.” He placed his palm flat on her thigh and gave it a squeeze. He loved the fullness of her legs and did in fact want to feel them wrapped around his waist as he fucked her hard.

She had been living with him now for close to two weeks. He couldn’t even believe how fast the time was flying by. With each day that passed, she was making more and more progress.

It wouldn’t be too long before she was capable of moving around on her own. The nights spent in her bed were his favorite. Being able to wrap his arms around her, pull her in close, and just hold her. After the first night of sleeping in her bed, he didn’t believe it was an open invitation, so the next night, he’d gone to his own lonely bed.

Maddie’s screams had woken him up.

The moment he was in bed with her, it was like he chased the dreams away, and he helped her to feel strong. To fight off whatever demons were affecting her. Since then, his place to sleep was right beside her.

She fit so perfectly in his arms. They were a perfect fit together.

“Why do you do that?” she asked.

“Tell you the truth?”

She nodded her head with a slight jerk.

“I don’t want to lie to you, Maddie. I’ve done a whole lot of it in my time, and I don’t know, I think with you, you’re the kind of woman who values honesty over everything else. Am I wrong?”

“You’re not wrong. I don’t want to be lied to.”

“Then how about we make a deal. I will never lie to you, and you will never lie to me.” He held out his hand.

“Why do I feel this is a bad idea?”

“You’re worried about lying to me?” he asked.

“No. I wouldn’t do that.”

“Then shake on it. You’ve got nothing to worry about.”

Her lips were pursed, and she tilted her head to the side, staring at his hand as if it was some kind of viper.

“I’m not going to bite ... too hard.”

“Haha, very funny.” She began to chuckle. “Fine. Deal.” She placed her hand within his.

Bull slid his palm up a little farther so the tips of his fingers were so close to her pussy but yet not even touching. If she made the wrong move, he’d be touching her so easily.

“Do you want me to fuck you?” he asked. “And no lying. We made that deal.”

She gasped. “That’s why you did it!”

“That and I have no interest in lying to you. Ever.” He smirked as he helped slide the sweatpants up across her delectable ass and onto her waist. “So tell me, Maddie. You want to fuck me? Are you curious?”

“You did this on purpose.”

“And don’t lie,” he said.

Of course, he’d done it on purpose. She could lie or ignore him. It wasn’t like he was going to hurt her to get what he wanted.

He folded his arms and waited.

“I can’t believe this. Fine.” She looked past his shoulder and nodded her head.

He put fingers behind his ear. “I’m sorry. I can’t hear that. Can you repeat that?”

“Yes. Yes, I’d like you to ... you know...” Her eyes went wide and she nodded.

Bull knew exactly what she meant, but that wasn’t the answer he was looking for.

“I don’t understand.”

“Yes, you do. You just want me to say it. Are you getting off on embarrassing me?”

“Not getting off on it, but enjoying it, yes.”

She shook her head, and her laughter was infectious. “Yes, Bull, I want you to ... make love to me.”

He wrinkled his nose. “Nah, I want to hear you say the word *fuck*. Just let me hear it. Give it to me.”

“You know how bad that sounds, right?”

“Hell yeah, and you know it’s going to feel so much better than that.”

“Oh, my God, this is insane.”

“I can’t hear you, Maddie? Tell me what you want.”

“Fine. Fine. Fine. I want you to fuck me.”

He shouldn’t have nagged because that was the sweetest fucking sin he’d ever heard. Cupping her face, he stroked his thumb across her lips right before he kissed her. It wasn’t enough. Nothing was ever enough when it came to Maddie, but right now, it was all he could do.

Stroking his hands down, he was so tempted to touch her, to give her just a little taste of what was to come, but he held himself back, not wanting to drive temptation too high for himself.

He broke the kiss when he heard a distinctive whining noise.

“What was that?” Maddie asked.

“That was a little gift I thought you might like.” He got to his feet and lifted her, placing her in her chair. She hated it when he did this, but with her bad leg and being unable to use crutches, this was how he helped her around.

He moved her toward the stairs. Rather than get the electric chair lift directly on the stairs, he got the company to curve it around so there was no risk to her safety. Bull helped her into the chair, and she smiled at him.

Each time he did this with her, she looked even more upset than the last time. Her mother had gotten into her head about her weight and looks.

Bull had never truly met the woman, and he was glad she was already dead because he would have enjoyed concocting some shit for that woman to feel. He didn’t understand how a mother could be so cold, so callous when it came to her own daughter. She’d infected her daughter’s head with such a low opinion of herself, and it drove him crazy just thinking about it.

Maddie clicked the button, and the chair moved downstairs to the bottom. He put the brakes on the wheelchair upstairs and followed her down.

Pat waited at the bottom. Before he could offer her a hand out, Bull was there, picking her up and helping her into the wheelchair.

"I can't wait until I can use crutches. I was talking to Molly, and she thinks after another X-ray to confirm my wrist has set properly, she doesn't think it will be long before I can start moving around on my own. I'm perfectly fine, she said."

"I know you're perfectly fine." He was aware the only reason her mobility had suffered was because of her wrist. The doctors had explained to him she would make a complete and full recovery. The only reason she struggled now was having a broken wrist along with the foot.

She was healing nicely. What he didn't want was for it to be rushed. Maddie had all the time in the world, as did he with taking care of her.

Another whine and a few little howls came from the main living room.

"What's that?" she asked.

"That is the sound of your present. Well, not a present really, but you know what I mean when I see them." Bull grabbed her wheelchair and moved her toward the living room. A makeshift kennel had been set up in his living room. A low cage surrounded the pups, and the mommy doggy looked so tired as they crawled all over her. He knew the dog was fine though. She was often playing with all of her pups, but they were a handful.

"Oh, my God," she said. "They're her ten pups?"

"Yep, and this little guy, I like to call Runt." The dog that was smaller than the others had come close to the wall to him.

Bull lifted him up with ease, and the little pup snuggled up against him.

"He likes you," Maddie said.

"He's a good boy. Strong too. A survivor." He moved toward her and placed Runt in her lap. "Here."

She groaned. "He's so tiny."

"I know. They do grow up so fast. You think they're tiny now, you should have seen them a few weeks ago."

"They're amazing. Don't you think?"

"Yeah, they are." He stroked her hair, watching as she petted Runt. "You want to go inside? Play with them?"

"Will I sound childish if I say yes?"

“Hell no. You’d sound like my kind of woman.”

She burst out laughing. “I think you’re a little biased.”

He kissed her head. “I can’t help it, Maddie. Just telling you you’re my kind of woman.”

Bull helped her out of the wheelchair and onto the floor but with her back resting against a chair.

“I’m going to grab you a drink,” he said.

The pups were all curious about the woman who had come to sit with her, and he chuckled as she was surrounded by all those curious little faces.

He went into the kitchen where Pat followed him.

“You want to tell me what’s going on?” he asked.

“Molly checks out. She’s the best physical therapist in the area. She is known to help with a speedy recovery, and people only have amazing things to say about her.”

“Good.”

“William and Craig have left. We’ve done a full check on local hotels and even nearby acquired properties. They didn’t stay.”

This was normally Grant’s job, but after their spat a few weeks ago, Bull had been toying with the idea of pulling his VP patch. The only reason Grant had it was because he was his brother. He had yet to earn the patch, and Bull wasn’t interested in giving something with ease.

The club members had to earn their place, but Grant had it easy. He did have to earn his patch, but the VP spot was given to him by family name only.

“What about the place where the dogs were kept. The fighting ring?”

“No new activity there. A few of the guys are going to head over there. Clear it out.”

“Get it done. I don’t want anyone to think they can start that kind of shit here.” He poured Maddie some milk. Bull looked toward Pat, and the brother looked ... different. “What is it?”

“Have you ever had that feeling you’re missing something?” Pat asked.

“Yeah.”

“Something doesn’t feel right.”

“The club? The kennel?”

“The shelter, the fighting ring, it just ... it feels off, you know?”

Bull folded his arms and looked toward Pat. "In what way?"

"I can't put my finger on it, and it pisses me off. I don't even know what I'm looking for. I've been through a shit load of paperwork and some shit doesn't make sense."

"Like?"

"Like the fighting ring. George is ... he was a lowlife, right. He liked fast cars, big money, and girls. That was his thing. For the most part, he was able to make it work and had been doing so for quite some time. He pinched from the shelter, but this was new."

"You think someone else is calling the shots?" Bull asked.

"Don't you think it stinks that William Ranford's brother happened to be in the right place at the right time with George?" Pat asked.

Bull ran a finger across his cheek, not liking the feeling rushing over him. "You're right. It doesn't make any kind of sense."

"None at all," Pat said.

"Look into it. See what you can find. Alert the club to be on guard at all times. I want to know everything that's going on all at once. They're to go into town and let their presence be known. I don't want anyone to think they can start shit and get away with it."

"Got it."

Pat left, and Bull picked up the glass of milk before heading into the living room.

"Is everything okay?" Maddie asked.

"It will be." That wasn't a lie.

Chapter Twelve

Weeks and months melded in together, and Maddie hated the long waits. The best news she had in months was the removal of her wrist cast. She picked up her crutches and began to move around the house, looking from room to room.

Bull had gone out.

She was stuck in his house. It was a really beautiful house, no denying it, but she was ... bored. So bored. All the time.

She rubbed at her temple as she moved around the house, getting used to the crutches with every single passing day. Molly had told her with her wrist now recovered, she didn't see a reason why she couldn't return to work. Bull had refused.

Staying in his house all day, doing nothing, wasn't fun.

Maddie lapped around his home, then went the other way, before moving in and out of each room. By the time she got to the kitchen, she was out of breath and perspiration dotted her brow, but it was the most exhilarating experience she had for a long time. "This is crazy."

Perched on the edge of one of the kitchen stools, she groaned. "I'm so bored."

She had never been this bored. This was one of the many reasons she volunteered. The loneliness killed her.

Grabbing her crutches, she got to her feet and made her way upstairs. She had stopped using the electronic chair, but Bull had kept it installed. She sat on her ass and moved up each step, taking her time.

When she got to the top step, she turned on her knees and crawled, taking her crutches with her. She moved slowly but with purpose until she got to her room. Lifting herself up, she entered her room and walked over to the bed then dropped down onto it.

The leg with the cast stood out like an eyesore. The once pristine white cast was covered in ink. The club had stopped by, each one taking turns to sign her cast. It was sweet of them. Unnecessary, but it had been fun. According to Rusty, it was a cast's right of passage to be signed. He had thought way too long about it.

She traced her fingers across the ink.

Holding the crutches, she used them to stand up, then moved toward the mirror Bull had in the corner.

Every single day since she had moved in with him, Bull told her how beautiful she was. He told her how special he found her. The way he touched her set her on fire, and he knew what he was doing.

Maddie stared at her reflection, and her mother once again came to haunt her. The cruel words echoed through her mind, mocking her. She hated it. Hated this feeling. Tears filled her eyes as she looked at her reflection, and she didn't know what she saw as she looked at herself, but it wasn't a desirable woman.

For weeks, she'd been in sweatpants because of the cast.

Bull had torn the legs off several pairs in order for her to wear it. The edge of the leg had torn shreds of fabric.

She reached down and touched them, the tip of her finger tracing across the cast.

Due to the extent of the damage, the doctors had insisted on a full-leg cast. She hated it.

Never would a day go by that she didn't remember the fear of being hit. The attack happened so fast, she didn't get a chance to defend herself.

"I'm fine." She didn't know why she felt the need to say it.

Lifting her hand, she tugged at the edge of the t-shirt she wore. It was white and one of Bull's. It didn't smell like him.

The tears that filled her eyes spilled over her cheeks.

She lifted her shirt and stared at her reflection, not liking what stared back at her. Before the attack, she'd been trying with her diet, and she'd lost a few pounds. She didn't even know how much she had lost now, or gained.

Maddie threw the shirt onto the bed and stared at her body. Her stomach was still round and her hips were wide. The bra she wore hid her breasts. It was unflattering. She loved lingerie, but this was a sporty kind of bra. She didn't feel sexy at all.

"When have you ever felt sexy?" she asked.

"You're fat. You're ugly. No man is ever going to want you."

Her mother's cruelty was a constant reminder of what she was never going to have.

"What are you doing up here?" Bull asked.

She gasped, spinning around to see him enter the bedroom. "I didn't hear you arrive home."

"Clearly."

Maddie tried to grab the t-shirt to cover up her body, but Bull got there first, grabbing the shirt and bunching it up into his fist.

"Can I have that back, please?" she asked.

"No."

"Don't do this."

"Don't what?" he asked. "Don't look at you? You want me to stand here with my eyes closed?"

"I was just..."

"What?"

She blew out a breath. "You will never understand."

"I know what your mother did to you was fucked up."

"My mother didn't do anything to me."

"No? You're not looking in that mirror telling yourself how ugly you are? How fat?" he asked.

She flinched as he spat the words at her.

He shook his head. "I hate that woman, Maddie. I fucking hate her."

With a few swift steps, he was right in front of her, and she had nowhere to go. As she stared up at him, her eyes went wide as he banded a hand around her waist and pulled her in close they were chest to chest.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"I'm touching you, Maddie. I'm trying to find out what your mother was so afraid of, but I think I know what it was."

"My mom wasn't afraid of anyone or anything."

"I beg to differ. Your mother was terrified of you and because she was, she bullied you."

Maddie shook her head. "She wasn't a bully."

"The names she called you. Any kid doing that to another would be called a bully. What makes your mom so different? Because she was a parent?"

She swiped at the tears that continued to fall, hating the feeling that filled her. "It's not just her though, is it?"

"Your pathetic dates? That's what they are, pathetic excuses for men. You, Maddie, are all woman, and they can't stand that. They can't stand to

know that you're too much for them, and they're not man enough to handle you."

She snorted. "If that was the case, what about your brother? Isn't he man enough?"

"My brother is a boy in a man's body. He doesn't count for shit."

She shook her head. There were too many people telling her how bad she was. "Can I have my shirt, please?"

Bull spun her around and placed one hand on her stomach. The other, he wrapped in her hair, tugging her head back.

"I get that you've been told what you look like by assholes, but the only opinion that counts is mine."

The hand on her stomach moved up.

"I will grant you, this bra is ugly. It needs to go." His lips grazed across her neck.

She closed her eyes as her body woke up. Her nipples tightened and her pussy grew slick. The hand on her stomach left, and she felt the catch at the back get tugged before her breasts spilled out.

"Now that's a beautiful sight," he said.

Maddie didn't fight him as the bra was removed and he cupped her breast in his big palm.

"You look at these tits and you think they're fat and ugly? They're not. They are so beautiful." He pinched a nipple, and she cried out. "And so sensitive." His teeth grazed her ear. "I love how tight they are. It's like your body knows I'm its master, and I am, Maddie. I'm the one who's in charge of this body."

He let go of her hair and then both of his hands were on her tits, pressing them together. "I can't wait until I can fuck these tits. You'll squeeze them together around my dick until I come all over them." He groaned.

Bull kept one hand on her breast and slid the other down her body, touching her stomach.

"Your curves don't intimidate me, Maddie. They make me fucking hot for you." He pressed his cock against her ass, and she moaned, wanting him inside her.

He teased the edge of the waistband, and she didn't think he was going to do it, but all of a sudden, his fingers went beneath the sweatpants.

He touched her pussy over her panties. Again, they were ugly, but he hadn't exposed them.

Maddie should have known it was only going to be a matter of time before he did that though.

He let her go and crouched down, grabbing the waistband of the pants and tugging them until they hit the floor.

She cried out, but he held her still and firm.

The panties, he tore them from her body. Other than the cast, she was completely naked. She tried to cover herself, but as Bull stood, he captured her arms and placed both of her hands behind his neck.

"Keep them there, Maddie."

She wanted to hide. So he didn't see all the lumps and bumps on her body, but Bull put his hands on her hips.

"Now, I want to fuck you so bad. Do you know how long I've imagined this moment?"

"You've imagined having me naked in front of a mirror?" she asked.

He laughed. "No. But I've imagined many times stripping you naked, spreading you out, and tasting every single inch of you." He let go of her hip and traced a finger around her body, going up her stomach, between the valley of her breasts, then back down, straight toward her pussy.

Bull cupped her between her thighs, and she gasped, taken aback by the touch. It was so bold, so full of ownership. She truly believed him when he claimed her body as his own.

"You feel wet for me, Maddie."

"Please," she said.

"Has any man ever touched you like this?"

"No."

"Good. I'm going to be all of your firsts. That boy from all those years ago doesn't count." He slid a finger between her slit and she cried out.

Maddie didn't know how he did it, but he touched the spot she wanted so desperately to be touched.

Bull groaned as he fingered her. "I need to taste you."

She didn't know what he meant until he moved them both toward the bed and had her flat on it within seconds.

How did she go from looking at herself in the mirror to being flat on her back like this?

Bull was careful as he moved her leg out of the way. With the other, he squeezed her thigh, lifting her leg. Both of his hands grabbed her ass, and then she was in heaven. His mouth was on her pussy, licking between her slit.

She cried out, lifting up and rocking against him as he teased her.

His touch was unlike anything she'd ever felt before in her life. He knew exactly what he was doing. His lips were magical, sending her higher than ever before on a pleasure point that she didn't think she was ever going to come down from.

Her teeth sank into her lip as she tried to contain the noises, but Bull had other ideas. "Let me hear how good this is for you."

He took her clit between his teeth, using just enough pain to make it almost too much to be good, but he soothed it out with the flat of his tongue, tracing across her clit as he moved back and forth, working her up. She had read books about this but had never once felt it. She figured a man giving a woman pleasure like this was all in the pages, but Bull was bringing it to life. As he stroked over her clit, she felt that sparkle. The heat. There was no way for Maddie to hold in her screams as he took her over the edge, giving her her first, true orgasm.

The following day, Bull looked into the shop and smiled. Keeping Maddie at home all day had been a big mistake. Finding her in the bedroom, crying, had broken his heart. She had no reason to cry. At least he'd gotten something out of it, and that had been the beautiful sounds of her orgasm, not to mention the sweet taste of her. Just thinking about it made his cock hard as rock.

The car in front of him was suffering because of how distracted he was, but he couldn't care.

Molly, the physical therapist, had told him Maddie's progress was amazing, and she had no doubt she would gain full function of her leg in no time at all. Broken bones were subjective, according to Molly. The healing time all depended on the person.

"All finished, Prez," Sweet said, wiping down one of the cars he'd been asked to fix up. This one had been damaged in a parking incident and had scratched half of the paint right off.

"Good job."

Sweet nodded at him and whistled as he made his way around back.

“Do you want me to take over?” Pat asked.

Bull turned toward Pat with a raised brow.

“You’ve been staring through the glass. Why don’t you take her out to lunch or something?”

“You think I’m distracted?”

“Yeah. This car has been on the ramp for two hours, and so far, you haven’t gotten to check on it.”

Bull glared at Pat, who immediately held up his hands.

“I’m not judging. I’m jealous, man. You got a girl that makes you think about her more than the cars. That’s a gift, and I’m willing to do whatever it takes for you to keep her.”

“She’s a distraction,” Bull said.

“A good distraction, Prez, and you need it. You don’t have to keep sacrificing your life for us. Believe me.”

“Since when have you gotten so philosophical?”

“Been doing some reading. Finally getting shit together in my head. I know what went down over there wasn’t my fault, and I can’t keep blaming myself for not bringing every single guy back. I’ve got to live my life. It’s what I’d want every other guy to do, and I know deep down, it’s what they would have wanted.”

Bull put his hand on Pat’s shoulder. “You’re a good man.”

“Oh, please, I’m the fucking sergeant at arms of the Chaos and Carnage MC. I’m not a good guy.”

He looked at Pat, and for the first time since knowing him for nearly thirty years, he had to wonder if this was the life he wanted.

“You want out of the club?”

Pat frowned. “No. I don’t. This club is my home. I guess I should put it another way. Out there, with my men, I was a good guy. I was serving my country. Back here, I’m the guy serving my club, doing whatever is possible for my men. This is my home, and I’m not the kind of guy to get a nine-to-five job and be stationed outside of a desk, Prez. I’m right where I need to be. Now, do us both a favor, and go take that sweet piece out to dinner. She looks so fucking miserable and happy at the same time.”

Bull laughed as he stripped out of his overalls and headed back toward the office.

He changed it for his leather cut, then headed back into the main reception desk. There was no one inside, and he went to Maddie.

“Come on, it’s time for us to head out.”

“Bull, it’s not even eleven yet.”

“Still, I’ve got plans and I’ve been keeping you all to myself. I think it’s only fair that I share you.”

It was the last thing he wanted to do, but Beatrice and Carl had been driving him crazy with the endless supplies of soup and lasagna to help Maddie on her recovery. With her staying with him and going to the clubhouse for her therapy sessions, he hadn’t been accepting visitors for her.

Taking her to the diner would hopefully make up for that, and he was so tired of eating the same food. The boys were grateful for it because they didn’t want any of the club girls to cook for them, but he needed a break, a long one.

Now was a good time for Maddie to see them as well. All of the bruising on her face was gone. She was only down to one cast, which would be welcome to them all. Her mobility was much better, and she was able to handle the crutches like a pro. He knew Maddie wouldn’t be happy with people worrying about her, which was why he waited.

“Do you want to walk or go by car?” he asked.

“Where are we going?”

“To the diner?”

“I can walk.”

He chuckled, moving in to step beside her.

“Thank you,” Maddie said.

“For what?”

“For letting me come back to work. Staying at your place was driving me crazy. Not that there’s anything wrong with your place.” She groaned. “You know what I mean.”

“I do know what you mean, and you don’t have to worry. It’s your place as well.”

“When I can, I will find somewhere else to live. I won’t be a bother.”

He didn’t like that, not one bit. “Did I say you needed to leave?”

“No, but I don’t want to impose.”

“Maddie, you’re not imposing when I’m the one who arranged it in the first place.” He moved in front of her. “My house is your house.”

“Okay, thank you.” There was a smile on her lips, and Bull had decided to make it his mission to always make her smile.

They headed through town. Everyone had heard what happened, and so they were stopped multiple times with people asking Maddie how she was. They also said if she needed anything then not to hesitate to reach out.

Maddie didn’t like any of the attention.

When they arrived at the diner, he heard her take a sigh of relief.

“You okay?” Bull asked.

“I’m fine. I think that’s the most anyone has ever talked to me.”

There was a sudden gasp, and he looked toward Beatrice who put the coffee pot she’d been holding on the table she was serving and rushed over.

Maddie didn’t have much time before she was pulled into Beatrice’s arms. “I’m so glad to finally see you.”

Maddie smiled and patted the woman’s arm, almost as if she was trying to reassure her. “It’s good to see you too.”

The crutch fell to the floor, and he made no move to catch it so Beatrice would give his woman time to breathe.

“Crap, I am so sorry. I’ve been going out of my mind worrying about you.” She cupped Maddie’s cheeks. “I’m so pleased you stopped by.”

“We’re here for some lunch,” he said.

“Of course. Of course.” Beatrice pointed out a private booth that had enough space for Maddie with her crutches and her foot.

Bull made sure to follow close behind her, to keep an eye on anyone who might intend harm to come to Maddie.

Everyone averted their gaze and Beatrice helped Maddie slide into the booth.

“Do you have everything you need? Carl and I were talking and if you need a place to stay, we’re happy to have you.”

“She’s with me,” Bull said.

“Oh, but in case you were too busy.”

“I’m not too busy for Maddie. She’s with me.” He looked at Beatrice as he took Maddie’s hand within his own, letting the other woman know without a shadow of a doubt exactly what he meant.

“My goodness. I’m so happy for you both. I will go and get you some coffee. Do you want coffee? I can whip you up that special hot chocolate you love so much with extra whipped cream and a sprinkle of chocolate?”

“No, no, I’m fine. Thank you. I’ll just have the coffee,” Maddie said.

Beatrice nodded and was gone.

Once again, Maddie breathed a sigh of relief.

“What’s going on?” Bull asked.

“In all honesty, I’m not used to this kind of attention. I think I prefer to be ignored.”

He didn’t get time to comment as with speed, Beatrice was back with mugs. “Have you ordered?” she asked.

“We haven’t had time to look at the menus yet,” Bull said.

“Right, right. Of course, you need time. Silly me.” She laughed. “Well, let me know when you are.”

Beatrice left, and Maddie’s hands were on her shoulders. He noticed the tension in her body.

“I’ll be right back. Don’t go anywhere.”

“As if I can,” she said, nodding at her crutches.

He noticed Maddie attempted to use humor when things were bothering her.

Bull ignored the *staff only* sign and followed Beatrice to where she stood, a hand on her chest, looking a little worried.

“You need to calm the fuck down,” Bull said.

Beatrice opened her eyes and looked at Bull. “I’m fine.”

“You’re acting guilty.”

“I am guilty.” Beatrice covered her mouth, and he saw tears fill the older woman’s eyes.

He knew what part Beatrice played in what happened to Maddie. Beatrice didn’t have a clue that she was leading the attackers right to Maddie, nor that she had served them after they’d beaten Maddie up.

It was with Beatrice’s help that he’d been able to locate the men who hurt Maddie.

“I should have known. The look of his knuckles. I’d known he’d been in a fight.” She blew out a breath. “I feel sick just knowing what he did. That poor girl.”

“Maddie’s got me. I would appreciate it if you would stop offering her places to go.”

“Bull, I know who you are. I know what you’re capable of. Do you think you’re the right fit for Maddie?”

He chuckled. For weeks now, this woman had been pissing him off with her constant questioning. With the way she kept asking about Maddie, second-guessing his decisions. Offering to come and help out where he didn’t need it.

Maddie didn’t need a babysitter. She needed someone who helped to make her feel like a person, and above all else, a desirable woman.

Each minute he spent with Maddie, he saw the damage her parents and people had done to her. She hadn’t had a good time of it. She had this warped sense of what she looked like, and he was trying to change that.

“You don’t get to tell me who I have the right to be with, Beatrice. You and I both know that Maddie hasn’t had it easy. You’ve kept your distance now, and it’s time for you to keep your distance again, do you understand me? Maddie doesn’t need to know the truth.”

Beatrice went pale.

“Now, I’m going to head back out there, and you’re going to stop being a mother hen as we both know you gave that right up a long time ago.”

Beatrice bowed her head, and he knew he had her.

The good thing about living in a town like Carnage was that he had dirt on most of the residence. Those that he didn’t lived good lives. Maddie was one of those people, but Beatrice and Carl had a history that only he knew about.

“Don’t hurt her,” Beatrice said.

“I’m the only one who will never hurt her.”

He left Beatrice and went back to find Maddie staring at the menu. She looked up at him with a smile as he came back.

“Hello, beautiful,” he said.

“Do you know what you fancy to eat? I can’t pick between the salad or the pasta salad.”

“Salad, seriously?”

“What? Carl does amazing salads, and you know I’m right.”

He snorted. “Babe, get a burger and fries.”

“I don’t want to.” She looked down at the menu.

“That’s what I’m getting because I know it’s all that will satisfy me.
Don’t get the salad unless it is all that you want, Maddie.”

She glanced down at her menu and nibbled on her lip.

He waited.

“A burger and fries sound great.”

“Good.”

Chapter Thirteen

"I can't believe you've never even considered decorating your house for Halloween," Maddie said.

She couldn't help but keep checking Bull out as he pushed the cart through the local supermarket. She'd been living with him now for nearly three months. Her physical therapy was going great, and there were times she didn't even need to use the crutches to hobble around as much as she did. Molly was very optimistic about her next appointment with the bone doctor.

Maddie only hoped they removed the cast so she could have full mobility once again. Hellen needed someone to help her run things at the animal shelter. The poor woman was having a hard time trying to cope with the endless calls, demands, and attempting to raise money. George had left the place in a state.

Chancing another glance at Bull, she had to wonder if George had disappeared for good. She never broached the subject with him. There was no point. It wasn't like he was going to give her the magical answers for everything.

"Halloween is a pointless investment," Bull said.

They stopped at some pumpkins. "Is that the only way you see the holidays? Investments?"

"I'm a businessman."

She held up a pumpkin. "You're right, there's no real investment in Halloween. It's not like people go out and buy way more candy than they need. Or pumpkins for that matter." She put two pumpkins in the cart. "No investment there. You know what else, cupcake cases." She saw them just across the shelf and she reached out, grabbing a pack. "I mean, who would have a little more fun with these bad boys in your life? I know I sure wouldn't."

"You're mocking me."

"Oh, no, not at all. I completely agree with you. Halloween is the worst of the worst." She smiled. "Now I'm mocking you."

"I've never been into the whole Halloween thing."

"When my parents were alive, and when I was living with them, I wasn't either. They sucked. They never had a single pumpkin or spare pair

of lights. They hated Halloween. Kids would come and knock on the door, and they'd ignore it. No candy. No tricks or treats. It sucked big time. Kids at school hated me just because of my parents."

"How come your parents never had any more kids?" Bull asked.

"I don't know. They got lucky with me and they said they didn't want to push their luck, I guess. They didn't like to talk about it."

Maddie put a few groceries into the shopping cart as they were running low on a few things. She hummed to herself as they moved down the aisles, and when they got to the costumes, she couldn't help but admire them. They never had anything in her size.

"You've never dressed up for Halloween?"

"Nope."

"Grab something," he said.

"That's okay. I don't need to dress up."

"Maddie, come on. Show me how much fun Halloween can be."

She put her hand on his arm and leaned in close. "They're never in my size."

"Oh," he said.

"It's fine. Come on. We can have fun without dressing up." She showed him some of the props suitable for outside, and then of course for the ones inside. He wasn't going for it, but he did agree to maybe putting a few in the garage while she worked.

She already had a master plan for making the main reception of the garage spooky. While he loaded up the car, Bull forced her to take a seat, and it was these moments she hated. She sat in the car as he put all the bags into the trunk.

"I'll be back in a second," Bull said.

He was gone before she got a chance to stop him.

Pulling the door closed, she reached into the back and grabbed the blanket that was there, only to scream when she saw Grant lying on the back seat.

"Holy crap, you scared me," she said, putting a hand against her chest.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to do that."

"What are you doing?"

"Needed to catch a ride," he said.

“Why not come in and ask?” She hadn’t been expecting him.

“Didn’t mean to scare the crap out of you, Maddie,” Grant said.

This made her pause. For years, this man had called her many other names, other than her real one. Fats. Chunk. Chubby. Ugly. They were the quick ones that came to mind.

“Bull will be here in a minute.”

“That’s okay. Bull doesn’t want to talk to me.”

She frowned. “Then why are you here?”

“I was hoping to be able to talk to you.”

“To me? Why?”

“You’re the only one who can talk any sense into my brother.”

“I don’t think that’s true.” She didn’t believe that for a second. Bull was his own man, and he didn’t need her meddling into his affairs.

“No? You don’t? Look around you. You just got my brother to go grocery shopping. He leaves that to a prospect or one of the sluts who stays with us. Not that he’d allow any of them to go to his precious house.”

“I thought you lived there as well.” In the three months she’d been there, she hadn’t seen Grant. It was why in the beginning she’d been so nervous about living with Bull, as she didn’t want to risk running into the guy who’d made her life miserable.

“I do, but that’s the problem. Since you moved in, I haven’t been able to go home. I was wondering if you could perhaps ask Bull to consider talking with me, or for us to just have a meeting. I ... I fucked up with him. I got angry and I said some shit I shouldn’t have. I want to make it right with him.”

“I don’t think I should get involved in this. I have no idea what any of this is about.”

“It’s about club stuff. Just, please, he’ll listen to you.” He opened the door and then was gone. What was it with the Reynolds men and just disappearing like that? They were starting to annoy her.

She sat back in her seat, and she didn’t have to wait long before Bull arrived.

“I’ve got you a present,” Bull said, putting a brown paper bag on her lap.

Curiosity got the better of her, and she opened up the brown paper bag. There was some folded-up fabric, and as she pulled it out, she couldn’t

help but laugh. There was a nurse uniform in her size.

“You got me a costume.”

“Yes.”

“What will your costume be?” she asked.

“The one I’m wearing. There ain’t nothing scarier than a biker, babe.”

She smiled. They drove back home, and once again, Bull ordered her inside the house while he did all the walking with the groceries. She rebelled and went to the kitchen to put the kettle on.

Boiling up some water, she began to unload the groceries she had purchased. She heard the door close, and seconds later, hands wrapped around her waist.

“I thought I told you to rest.”

“I can do other jobs. You know I’m good for it.” She leaned back against him, putting her hand on his.

He hadn’t touched her since that day a few months ago when he’d licked her pussy. Maddie hadn’t brought it up with him, but now as she stood in the kitchen with his arms wrapped around her, she couldn’t help but wonder why.

“Grant was camping out in the car,” Maddie said.

Bull tensed. “Did he say anything?”

“He wanted me to ask you to talk to him.” He loosened his grip enough for her to spin around in his arms and look at him. “You’re mad?”

“No, I’m not mad with you.”

“Grant’s your brother.”

“He needs to learn to keep his mouth shut and to start using his head instead of his fucking dick.” Bull took a deep breath. “No, I’m not going to get in an argument with you about any of this.” He cupped her cheek, tilting her head back. “I want to kiss you.”

He pushed her back until she stood against the wall.

She let out a gasp as he thrust his pelvis against hers.

“Do you feel that?” he asked.

Maddie did but she put a hand on his chest. “Wait.”

“What is it?”

“Why now?” she asked. “Are you doing it to distract me?”

“Maddie, babe, I don’t know what the hell you’re talking about.”

“You ... er ... you haven’t touched me since that day when you...”
Why was this so hard?

“Licked your tasty pussy.”

“It couldn’t have been that tasty,” she said. “You didn’t come back for seconds.” She slapped her hands across her mouth, and Bull laughed. “I can’t believe I said that to you.”

“Don’t worry about it. I find it real sexy when you talk all dirty to me.”

“That wasn’t me talking dirty, Bull.”

He pressed his face against her neck and groaned. “Do you have any idea how hard it has been to be a good little boy?” he asked.

“What do you mean?”

“I’ve wanted to taste you so many times, but I held myself back. Molly told me that if we got it wrong, if I hurt you, it could put your recovery back months. I didn’t want to do that to you. The key to healing fast is not overdoing it. Resting for the right amount of time, not doing anything strenuous. Lying next to you these past few months has been fucking torture. All I’ve wanted to do is fuck you every single chance I’ve got, but I’ve been good.” He kissed her neck, her cheek. “Molly believes you’ve got a good chance of that cast coming off. It’s getting in your way more than it’s helping you.”

“She’s right.” She closed her eyes as Bull kissed down her chest toward her breasts but then stopped.

“And that’s why I’m going to keep on being good, even though it’s the last thing I want to do.” He sank his fingers into her hair, pulling on the length and causing just a slight pinch of pain that then exploded into pleasure as he nipped at her lips. “But the moment that cast comes off and you get the clean bill of health, Maddie, I’m going to fuck you, and I’m going to do it hard. That’s a promise I make to you.”

Maddie walked into the shop a week later. The cast had come off. The scans had shown a complete recovery. There were times she would get aches and pains, but that was to be expected, the doctor had said.

She was back to her old self.

She’d already called Hellen to let her know she’d be by the animal shelter tomorrow. It was time for her to get over her silly phobia and to get

back out there, working. She didn't want to be held back by the bad memories. The men weren't going to come back and hurt her again.

Bull had promised her that, and she believed him. She didn't want to think about why or how he knew they weren't coming back, and she wasn't going to question him.

Smiling at a couple of the customers waiting for their cars to be finished, she moved to the staff room, dropping off her coat and bag before walking back into the main reception. Bull hadn't come to see her yet. She was supposed to call him after her appointment, but she'd been so freaking excited. They had allowed her to have a wash at the hospital, which she'd been grateful for.

From the hospital, she'd grabbed a taxi to bring her back to town, and she'd walked to work. It had felt good to finally be moving around.

Bull's promise to her of what would happen when she had recovered rang in her head, but she ignored the way her body came alive. She was going to focus on taking care of everyone here, rather than her body's needs.

Times passed, and she wasn't sure how much until she was suddenly grabbed from behind and lifted up.

Within seconds, she was over Bull's shoulder as she recognized his pants.

"Someone will be out to deal with you all in a second. Now if you excuse me."

"Bull, what the hell are you doing?" she asked.

He slapped her ass and she growled at him.

"Hey!"

"You were supposed to call me."

The door closed, and the cold air hit her.

"My bag and coat."

"Will be safe and fine at the shop while I deal with you." The promise in his voice was so tempting.

"Bull, put me down."

"When I'm good and ready."

He was only ready when they got to the car, and he placed her on the ground, but then she was inside the car. The man was a damn machine at getting what he wanted, and all she could do was follow his lead.

“Bull!”

He slammed the door closed, rounded the car, and climbed inside.

“I’m pissed at you for not calling me to come and get you.”

“In case you didn’t notice, this was supposed to be a surprise for you,” Maddie said. “And you’re spoiling it.”

She cried out as he sank his fingers into her hair and pulled her in close. His lips grazed across her.

This kiss wasn’t gentle. It was full of fire and passion, and it made her ache in all the right places. She didn’t want him to stop.

“I told you what was going to happen when you got the all-clear. That hasn’t changed.”

Her heart raced as he turned over the ignition. His hand grabbed her thigh at the same time he pulled out of the parking lot of the garage. She didn’t need to look at where they were going to know he was heading straight home.

For sex.

No, not for sex, to fuck.

She wasn’t upset about that.

Maddie couldn’t wait to feel this go a little further. Bull had been teasing her for what felt like days with the way he touched her. Each stroke, each caress reminded her of what she could have, rather than what she did have.

He sped all the way home, and Maddie didn’t wait around for him to be a gentleman. She climbed out of the car and took the steps to the house, to get to the front door. Bull didn’t let her go too far. He was right behind her, and she spun to face him as he put the key into the lock.

Just like that, the door was open, and he moved her inside.

Even before they were inside, Bull was tearing at her clothes. At first, she didn’t know what to do, but then it was like she woke up.

He was tugging at her clothes, and she reached for him, grabbing his shirt and pulling it up and off over his head. The leather cut he often wore had already fallen to the floor.

Bull cupped her face, kissing her as he moved her back. She hit the wall and grasped his belt, easing it open.

“Do you know how hard it has been?”

“How hard has it been?”

He grabbed her hand and pressed it against his dick. They both groaned. "So fucking hard. Harder than it should have been."

Each time he'd put her hand on his dick, she hadn't made a move to touch him, or to squeeze. This time, she did.

She wanted him. She wanted to know what good sex felt like. The only person she'd been with was the guy on prom night, and it was time to rid her mind of all those disastrous memories.

Bull took her hand, and even though they weren't completely naked, he walked her upstairs. As they did this, her heart began to race at what was waiting for her at the top. Her body was on fire with need.

Cover up.

Don't let him see.

She ignored those thoughts as Bull pulled her into the bedroom and stripped the last of her clothes out of the way.

He stepped back and took care of his own clothes. Then they stood, two consenting adults in his bedroom.

"Tell me, Maddie, are you ready for this?" he asked.

"Yes."

"You want me to fuck you?"

"Yes." There was no reason to hesitate. She knew what she wanted.

"Then come here."

She moved closer to him, and Bull rested his hands on her ass, squeezing her tightly.

Maddie put her hands on his chest, gliding her palm down until she got to his cock, and wrapped her fingers around his length.

"Oh, fuck, baby," he said.

"Tell me how you like it."

In answer, he swung her around until she was on the bed and he was above her. "There's going to be enough time for that. For now, I want you to feel." He kissed her lips. She'd already let go of his cock as he moved her.

Bull was on a mission though. He didn't linger as he moved down her body. He stopped at her breasts, flicking each bud with his tongue. She gasped, arching up into his touch, and he laughed.

"Fuck, yes, that's what I'm talking about." He grabbed her tits and gave them a squeeze together, his tongue lapping between both of them.

Each stroke set a fire between her legs.

When he took one nipple into his mouth and bit down hard, Maddie didn't think she was going to be able to survive this for much longer. He knew what he was doing to her body, lighting it up. Making her ache, driving her wild for more.

"Yes, yes, yes," she said, screaming each word as he took her higher.

Bull let go of her tits and traced his lips down toward her pussy.

He grabbed her legs, spreading them wide, and she leaned up, going to her elbows so she would be able to see.

Bull ran his hands up the inside of her thighs and teased open her slit.

"You have such a pretty pussy, Maddie. You're wet all for me." His tongue danced across her clit, and she sank back, moaning as he licked and sucked at her, driving her wild and desperate for more.

She didn't want him to stop. As he stroked down to her entrance and thrust his tongue inside her, she didn't think she would ever be the same again. He was an expert. Her body belonged to him. Each touch sending her higher.

Within seconds, she knew she was close to an orgasm. Bull worked her body so close, and when she came, his tongue was like a piece of artwork, driving her higher toward the tip of the peak.

She shouted his name. Everything lost focus as the pleasure took over. Bull prolonged it. She didn't know how he managed to do it, but his expert touch awakened her need for him.

He pressed a kiss to her clit and moved up her body. The weight of his cock settled between her legs, and Maddie was more than ready for what was to come next.

"You're so fucking beautiful," he said.

She believed him. He was the only person to tell her how beautiful she was.

"I'm going to try to be gentle with you."

"You don't have to be."

He reached between them, and she watched as he grabbed the base of his cock. The tip of his length stroked through her slit, and she moaned, falling back to the bed as he nudged her clit. He moved down, going to her entrance. "Look at me, Maddie," he said.

She stared into his eyes as he held himself still, and then, he slammed every single inch inside her.

Maddie cried out. She couldn't keep her eyes open. He was long and thick, and as he slammed inside her, she didn't know what the hell happened. There was slight pain as he thrust in hard and deep.

Bull growled, holding himself inside her. "You said you weren't a virgin," he said.

"I wasn't. I told you. I had sex." Tears filled her eyes as the pain had taken her by surprise.

"That fucker."

"What?" she asked. This was going horribly wrong.

"The kid all that time ago, he didn't actually fuck you. He was too fucking excited to get his dick inside you."

"That's not possible. I felt pain when we ... should we be talking about this?"

"We can, but I'm telling you, Maddie, you were a virgin," he said. "This pussy ain't ever seen a nice hard cock."

"Do you want to stop?"

"Fuck no. You're mine, Maddie, and I'm never letting you go." He cupped her face and kissed her lips, then he moved up toward the corner of her eyes, kissing her tears away.

She breathed out a sigh of relief.

"You're all mine, and I'm going to enjoy every fucking second of making you mine."

He pulled out of her only to slam back inside her, each thrust seeming to go slightly deeper than the last one. The pain had ebbed away, and in its place was the most amazing feeling in the world. Maddie didn't lie still. She couldn't help but meet him thrust for thrust.

"Fuck, yes, that feels so good. Yeah, Maddie, fuck me." He grabbed her hands, pinning them to the bed, holding her in place as he fucked her pussy.

"Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes," she said, moaning as the feel of his cock hitting something inside her made her ache for more. She didn't want him to stop. The pleasure was out of this world.

Bull reached between them, stroking her clit, and sent her over the edge into another orgasm that set off his own. He thrust deep inside her,

filling her with his cum as she felt each pulse.

Chapter Fourteen

“We haven’t left this bed in three days,” Maddie said. “Won’t people start to be worried about you?”

Bull kissed his way down her stomach. His palm was between her thighs, stroking her pussy.

“They can all wait. I’ve got more pressing business to attend to.” He lifted off the bed and flipped Maddie to her knees. He helped to move her into position so she was on her knees, her body flush to the bed. He loved the way her ass stuck up in the air.

Massaging the cheeks of her ass, he spread them open and smiled at the sight of her wet cunt.

Three days ago, Maddie had been a virgin. It had been confirmed after he pulled out of her, leaving a trail of his semen and her virgin blood.

He’d never had a virgin before. When he found out Maddie had been with someone else, he’d been pissed. He didn’t give a fuck if it was hypocritical of him. He wanted Maddie all to himself, and his wish had been granted.

Not in a way he’d expected.

When he’d slammed balls deep inside her, and she’d cried out in pain, that would stay with him forever. He would always treasure the precious gift of her virginity.

What Maddie didn’t yet know was that he intended to keep her for all fucking eternity. There was no going back with this woman. She was his just as he was hers. Nothing was going to tear them apart.

He cupped between her thighs, sliding a finger deep inside her and hearing her slight moan as he pushed a little deeper. Adding a second digit inside her, he couldn’t believe how tight she still was. He’d been fucking her for three days straight. Making up for all of the lost time.

His cock was already hard again and raring to go for another round.

Pulling his fingers from her pussy, he traced them back to her anus. The first touch across that puckered hole made her tense. She didn’t pull away though, and he smiled as he pressed a finger against her asshole.

“I nearly forgot you like reading dirty books,” he said.

“They’re not dirty. They’re romance.”

“The last time I checked, a rom-com doesn’t have anal sex in it.”

“So they’re a mature romance.”

He chuckled. The tight ring of muscles of her anus was keeping him out, but he wasn’t going to be told no. He pushed his finger past that tight ring of muscles, and Maddie cried out.

He saw her hands clench as she gripped the blanket beneath her.

“Do you want me to stop?” he asked.

“No. I’m fine. You can keep going.”

Bull pressed his finger inside her, hearing her sharp intake of breath. He waited for her to get accustomed to it before easing out, only to add two fingers this time. He moved into a more comfortable position, grabbed his cock with his free hand, lined the tip against her entrance, and slowly sank into her pussy.

Maddie pressed back against him. She was so wet.

He hadn’t worn a condom with her. Not once, and he loved the feel of her tight heat wrapped around his length.

“Bull,” she said, moaning his name, which he loved the sound of. There was no greater sound to him than his woman wanting more of him.

He was more than happy to give her more. “Do you want me to stop?” he asked.

“No!”

He kept his dick inside her and began to rock back and forth, making her take his dick and going deeper. With his fingers in her ass, he set up a steady pace, and it didn’t take long for her to get accustomed to the feel of him inside her.

Bull wanted to fuck her ass. To take her hard and deep, but he was going to have to take his time and let her get used to him.

She was tight with just his fingers inside her.

“Touch your pussy, Maddie.”

This was something he was getting her used to, touching herself in front of him. She got nervous seeking pleasure, but he loved to watch so damn much.

He couldn’t get enough of it. There was so much he wanted to explore with her. All he needed was for her to have the courage to let go. To trust him with her pleasure and her body. He was never going to let her go.

She moaned. The sound was deep, guttural, and as her pussy tightened around his length, he gripped her hip and closed his eyes.

He was so close to blowing his nut off, but he contained himself. "Does that feel good?" he asked.

"Yes."

Stroking his fingers into her ass, he held himself still inside her, feeling her as she got closer to orgasm. Each stroke drew her higher and higher, and when she was so close, he pulled his fingers from her asshole, grabbed her hips, and fucked her harder, taking her deeper.

They both moaned as they found their release.

Once again, he filled her pussy, hoping like hell that it took. He wanted her pregnant.

They collapsed to the bed, and Maddie sighed. "I didn't think it was possible to feel this good."

"Tell me about it," he said.

He hadn't lived like a monk, but Maddie was everything. "I'm going to run a bath. I'll be right back."

Bull rushed to the bathroom, poured some bath salts into the water, and started to run some hot water into the tub. He checked the temperature of the water, then returned to the bedroom to find Maddie on his cell phone.

"Yes, he's right here." Maddie got to her feet. "I'm sorry. I called out to you, but you didn't answer. I don't know who it is."

He took the phone from her, and he didn't recognize the caller's number. There was no saved name for the number.

"Hello." He grabbed Maddie's hand and led her into the bathroom.

"It's William Ranford."

Bull gripped the cell phone tightly but made no move to show Maddie he wasn't happy with who was calling.

He let Maddie go, covering the earpiece of his cell phone. "Babe, I've got to take this."

Moving back into the bedroom, he made sure to pull the door closed so she wouldn't overhear the conversation.

"How did you get this number?"

"The how doesn't matter. We need to talk," he said. "I want to arrange a meeting."

"I'm not interested in a meeting." He wasn't going to meddle with the likes of Ranford.

“It’s about the dogfighting, Bull. I’m not reaching out to arrange a business meeting. I’m offering you an olive branch here. I can’t talk about it over the phone, but believe me when I say you’re going to want to meet with me.”

Bull clenched his hand into a fist. “Fine! When?”

“Halloween. It’s the best cover I can come up with. I’m coming to your clubhouse. I heard you were having a Halloween party. I’ll consider this my personal invite.”

The cell phone went dead.

“Fucking bastard.” He tossed the phone across the room. It hit the wall and shattered before it even got to the floor.

Three days.

For three days, he had experienced peace.

This wasn’t it. This was a cold, hard wakeup call.

“Is everything okay?” Maddie asked, coming out of the bathroom.

He wasn’t angry at her. “Of course, babe. Nothing to worry about.” He forced a smile to his lips, and he thought he had her convinced until she flinched away from his touch. “What’s the matter?” he asked.

“Nothing. Nothing. I just ... I...” She smiled and waved her hand in front of her face. “Ignore me. I don’t have a clue what’s going on with me.”

He understood it.

Pulling her in close, he pressed a kiss to her forehead. “You should be in the bath!”

“I heard you talking and you sounded angry. I got worried.”

He held her a little tighter. His club life was never going to touch her. “It’s nothing to be worried about.”

She pointed toward the broken cell phone. “That’s you having a handle on it?”

He chuckled. “I slipped.”

“Right, of course.” She put her hand to his chest. “Everything is okay though?”

“Everything is fine. More than fine.” He kissed her head. “Come on.” He grabbed her hand and led her back toward the bathroom. Stepping into the bathtub with her, he couldn’t resist wrapping his arms around her, holding her close, and breathing her in. This was his woman, and he didn’t want to give her up, not ever.

“What’s the matter, Bull?” she asked.

“Nothing.” He kissed the top of her head again. Maddie belonged to him, and he didn’t want to give her up. The twisting in his gut meant nothing. There was no problem, nothing to worry about.

After reaching for the soap, he lathered up his hands, and rather than dwell on what was going on in his mind, he put his hands to her body and washed her body.

He put all thoughts of the upcoming meeting out of his mind and washed her body. The moment she started to moan, his cock began to ache. Bull moved her so she was facing him, and he cupped her face, pulling her hair back. He wrapped the length around his fist, staring into her eyes. With his other hand, he moved between her thighs, cupping her pussy. She released another moan. The sound was so fucking beautiful, and he couldn’t get enough of it.

Bull stroked her clit, rubbing his fingers back and forth across her nub. Hearing the subtle moan spill from her lips, he couldn’t get enough of the sound. All he wanted to do was make her come again and again.

“Please,” she said.

“You want my cock, Maddie?” he asked.

“Yes, please, yes.”

“So polite.” He moved her so she straddled his waist, and reaching to his already erect dick, he placed it at her entrance.

Letting go of her body, he grabbed her hips and slowly lowered her down onto his stiff prick. They both moaned as she took all of him. Her pussy so tight and yet so wet. There was no way he was ever going to use condoms between them. This pussy was perfect wrapped around his length.

He gripped her hips tightly within his grasp, groaning as she seemed to pulse around him. So fucking responsive. He didn’t know how he’d gotten so lucky, but there was no way in hell he was letting her go.

Maddie held on to his shoulders and slowly rocked up and down his cock. With his grip on her hips, he jerked her down his length, making her take more of him, each stroke hitting a part of her that made her teeth sink into her lip. She looked so sexy, so wild. He loved the bounce of her tits as she took him deep. There was never a more beautiful sight than the one before him.

So tempting. All his.

He couldn't get enough of her.

"Please, Bull."

Stroking around her body, he went straight between her thighs and started to caress her clit. Each touch had her gasping with her teeth sinking into her lips. He leaned forward, taking one breast into his mouth and biting down, not too hard, but enough to make her cunt squeeze his dick.

Her body was sensitive. He didn't know what had made it so, but he was addicted.

After running his hand down her body, he cupped her ass. His fingers tightened in the flesh before releasing it. He gave the rounded cheek a little slap before holding it tightly.

She screamed his name, and he felt the moment she was so close. He didn't stop stroking but thrust up inside her. He was close. The moment she hit, the tightness of her pussy sent him over the edge.

He filled her pussy with his cum as she rocked against him, riding the wave of her release.

Bull let go when her orgasm finished, and he cupped her face, pulling her down and kissing her like his life depended on it.

"You look sexy as fuck, babe," Bull said, grabbing her hands.

Maddie attempted not to wriggle in the nurse's uniform, but it was proving to be a challenge. Her body felt a little constricted, and she tried to cover more of her body. There was no room to hide in this ... thing.

"I look stupid."

He put her hand over his dick, and she felt it already getting hard. Bull had a way of doing this that was sexy. She didn't know why because if any other guy kept putting her hand on his dick, she'd have kicked him in the balls right about now.

"Does that feel like you look stupid?"

"Bull, I hate to break this to you, but you're always hard." She let go of his penis to cup his face.

"Do you have a problem with that?" he asked. His hands went to her ass and he groaned. "I don't want to let you out of my sight."

"You have nothing to worry about," she said.

"You know who you belong to, right?"

"What?"

“This,” he said, hands roaming all over her body. “Belongs to me. I don’t share, not ever. You got that?”

She rolled her eyes.

“I’m being serious. You’re mine.”

She stared into his green eyes, a little taken aback. “Okay.”

He pushed some of her hair off her face. “No one else is going to steal you away from me.”

“No one else wants me,” she said.

“Then I’m the lucky bastard who knows a prize when I see it.” He kissed her again, and Maddie forgot everything.

Wrapping her arms around him, she kissed him back. Her life had been full of constant what-the-fuck moments in the past few weeks. No, the past few months. His hands roamed down her back, going to her ass, and he gave this guttural moan that never failed to arouse her.

“We could stay in,” she said.

“You have no idea how tempting that offer sounds.”

“It’s always on the table.” She ran her hands down his jacket before moving them up. There was a time she was nervous to touch him, but not anymore, she couldn’t get enough of touching his body.

“Are you embarrassed by me?” he asked.

She burst out laughing. “No.”

“Good, because I’m not giving up an opportunity to show you off.”

Maddie continued laughing as he shoved his shoulder into her stomach, and before she could stop him, he’d lifted her right off the ground.

“Put me down,” she said.

He gave her ass a whack, and it only made her laugh harder, but he did finally put her on her feet.

“Men are going to look at you tonight.”

“I doubt that.”

He gripped her chin and forced her to look at him. “Don’t do that.”

“Do what?”

“You know what. I can’t stand it when you don’t see yourself the way I do.”

She nibbled on her lip, and there he went moaning again. “I’m so tempted.”

“I don’t mind staying in.”

“Not happening. We’re going to the clubhouse whether you like it or not.”

She glanced down at her costume. “I don’t think there is going to be any modesty attempting to ride on the back of your bike.”

“We’re not going on my bike, babe. I’m driving you in the car.”

“Oh.” He hadn’t gotten her to ride on the back of his bike, not once. In all of her life, she had never once been tempted to ride on a bike. They were death traps, but since going out with Bull, she couldn’t help but wonder why he didn’t want to ride with her.

“My sexy dead nurse,” he said, holding out his hand.

She placed her hand within his and they left the house.

His car awaited, and he was sure to open her doors, playing the role of the perfect gentleman.

She climbed in, trying to keep her panties from showing. Bull had tried to convince her not to wear any, but she wasn’t that daring.

With the door shut, she watched him. Something was off with Bull, but she didn’t know what. It was like he wasn’t all there, lost in his own thoughts. Whenever she asked him about it, he laughed it off.

He climbed behind the wheel, put the key in the ignition, and turned it over.

“Are you missing your bike?” she asked.

“Nah, there will be time for that.” He pulled out of his driveway and started down the road toward the clubhouse. She saw the bikes on the side of the road before they even got to the clubhouse.

Other than for physical therapy, she’d never been there. Never been given a tour around. She was pushed from one room to another.

The party was in full swing as they pulled up. She noticed it was a mass of people, bikes, cars, but there was one slot that hadn’t been taken, which Bull slid straight into.

They clearly knew not to mess with their boss’s parking space, or their Prez. She noticed Pat calling him that most of all.

Bull climbed out of the car, and she did the same. The noise was deafening. She couldn’t even hear herself think. Bull took her hand and led her out of the cold and straight into the main building. It wasn’t any better. The noise was loud, and that was an understatement, but one look around and Maddie knew she was at a party. Men and women in various outfits.

She couldn't believe what she saw once she got inside the building. There were people actually having sex on the main floor.

"Yeah, I better warn you, parties at the clubhouse get wild," Bull said, taking her hand and leading her toward the bar. He had to shout near her ear to be heard.

Every single one of her senses were on high alert. Men and women kissing, touching. There were naked women walking around, being touched, laughing, and seeming to lap up the attention.

Maddie stayed close to Bull's side even though she doubted she'd ever be desired in such a way.

"A beer and a bottle of orange."

"You don't think I can drink?" Maddie asked. Near the bar, the music didn't seem so loud.

"You want a beer?" he asked.

She didn't drink, but seeing as it was Halloween, and after everything she'd gone through, she was more than ready to rebel just a little bit.

"Sure."

"My girl is ready to party," he said. "Be careful. Beer can make you do crazy things."

A guy wearing a prospect patch handed her a beer, and she thanked him. With Bull watching her, she felt her face start to heat up. Trying to ignore his stare, she took a sip of the beer and couldn't control her face.

Bull laughed.

"That's disgusting!" She wrinkled her nose. "How can you drink that?"

"You kind of get used to it." Bull shrugged, sipping at his drink.

She took another sip, and it wasn't so bad because she was getting used to the nasty taste.

"Come on, time to dance," he said.

He took her hand, and she swallowed another drop of beer, putting the bottle on the counter before Bull led her away onto the makeshift dance floor.

The music was fast. Bull wrapped his arms around her, putting his hands on her ass as he pulled her close. The hard length of his erection dug into her stomach. With all the naked women around him, she didn't know what he saw in her.

“You look beautiful,” he said.

“You don’t have to say that.”

“I know I don’t, but that doesn’t mean I don’t want to. You’re beautiful, Maddie, and one day you’re going to see it too. I know you are.” He pressed a kiss to the corner of her mouth, right there in front of the whole club.

Maddie jerked back.

He’d never kissed her in front of people before. They had always been in private. She didn’t know why this mattered to her, but it did.

“You’re mine, Maddie. Everyone here knows it.”

They were still having to yell to be heard over the music.

Bull cupped her cheek, bringing her in close, and she ran her hands up his chest, moving them around his neck to draw him as close as possible. Nothing seemed to do. The hand on her hip moved toward the base of her back, then down toward her ass. She released a gasp as he squeezed.

The music changed, seeming to turn down as a slow song erupted. There was a loud chorus of boos.

“I want to take you into my office, bend you over my desk, and fuck you so hard you can’t think straight. When we’ve had enough fun, that’s exactly what I’m going to do.”

He’d turned her into an addict when it came to sex. “Why not do it now?” she asked.

Before he could answer, someone patted on his arm.

“It’s time.” She recognized Pat’s voice.

“Hey, Pat,” she said.

“Maddie.”

Bull looked behind him, and his body tightened. Whatever he saw, he didn’t like.

“What’s the matter?” she asked.

“Oh, it’s nothing.” He grabbed her hand. “Fuck.”

“Bull,” a large man dressed as a pirate said.

“William.”

“Great party,” he said.

“Thanks.”

Maddie looked from one to the other. Bull didn’t even bother with the introductions. She stayed perfectly still at his side.

“Who is this lovely woman?” he asked.

“None of your business, that’s who. Come on, Maddie,” Bull said. His hands were at her shoulders, and she was being moved across the room toward the bar.

“Gaz, keep an eye on her. That’s an order.”

“Got it, Prez.”

Bull turned toward her.

“What’s going on?” she asked.

“I’ve got some business to attend to. You have to stay here.”

“I could just go home.”

“No,” he said. “I’ll take you if you still want to go home, but not yet. We’re going to enjoy this party.”

He stroked her cheek and pressed a breathless kiss to her lips. In the next second, he was gone.

“What can I interest you in?” Gaz asked.

“A beer would be great,” she said.

If she was ordered to stay in this one spot for the remainder of the party, or until Bull came back, then she was drinking beer. The awful taste was soon numbed.

Gaz rarely moved out of her sight. When he wasn’t serving, he stood right in front of her, his gaze latched on to her.

“You know you don’t have to keep on looking at me. I’m not going anywhere.”

“I’m doing what the prez said. He wants me to keep an eye on you.”

“Don’t you want to enjoy this party?”

“No, I want to make sure his woman is okay.”

She rolled her eyes. “I’m fine. Come on,” she said, looking back at the party. “Isn’t there someone here you’d love to dance with?”

There was a flash in his eyes. It was gone as quickly as it appeared, but she saw it and smiled. “There is?”

“No. There are a lot of women here. I don’t like to pick.” He went silent and his gaze stayed perfect still on hers.

“Okay, this isn’t creepy at all.”

It was creepy. Super creepy, but she tried to ignore it, wondering at the same time what was wrong with Bull.

Chapter Fifteen

"You are not a guest here," Bull said the moment they were inside his warehouse at the back of the clubhouse.

He didn't want to have this discussion with William back at the clubhouse. They had already checked for wires. He didn't trust anyone, not even a crime lord like William.

"And here I was thinking we were becoming good friends."

"Cut the crap. We both know there's no friendship here. We're two completely different people. Now just tell me what you want," he said.

All Bull wanted to do was return to his woman. He didn't like her being alone in the club. If Gaz wanted his patch, he'd keep an eye on her and make sure nothing happened to her. Most of the guys knew who she was and would steer clear, but there were a few who'd see her as fresh meat.

Just thinking about that made his hands clench into fists.

Maddie was his. All his.

"It is a nice place you've got here."

"Thanks. What are you doing?" Bull asked.

"Did you look into the dogfighting ring?" William asked. All playfulness was gone from his expression.

"Beyond your brother and George, no. I took care of it."

"I'm reaching into my jacket pocket for a picture," William said.

"Go for it." He was bored of this.

William approached him, and their men drew guns.

"Enough," William said. "We are not here to fight."

Bull waved his hand for his men to put down their weapons and then took the photograph from William's hand. "This isn't me," he said.

"I know it's not you. I looked into your history and you have never delivered heads of dead family members."

"I'm sorry about your brother." Bull looked toward the door to see Grant guarding it.

As much as he hated his brother from time to time, the man was still his flesh and blood, and he would never do anything to kill him. He may want to, but Grant was family. The only family he had left.

"Thank you."

“Do you know who killed him?” Bull asked.

“Have you ever heard of the Vito Crew Cartel?”

Bull tensed. They were one of the cartel crews he had no choice but to still have dealings with.

“You know I do.”

“I know that the cartels are a tough gang to get rid of. They’re fucking pests,” William said.

“Look, I’m sorry about your brother, but I do not need you to go and stick your problems into our club’s messes. I’m dealing with the Vito Crew. I don’t know what your brother did—”

“They’re the ones who reached out to George,” he said.

“What?”

“Permission to reach inside my jacket.”

“For fuck’s sake, just do it. You’re the one to call this meeting, and last time I checked, we left this on good terms, but if you keep being cryptic, this is going to get bloody.”

“Does your impatience have anything to do with that woman here?”

Bull tensed up again. “You don’t talk about my woman, got it?”

William smirked. “It will be. Here.”

He had a file, and Bull snatched it from him, losing his patience with every passing second.

“I make it my business to know who is playing close to home. The Vito Crew Cartel has been running drugs through my city. They got to my brother. He was addicted to their ... product. He showed weakness, and from that moment, they were in. I don’t know what they want from this town, but the fact they had started to do business right underneath your nose without you realizing, I say we both have a problem.”

Bull looked through the file and he didn’t like what he saw.

The Vito Crew were never supposed to be on Carnage property, but right here, clear as a picture, they were calling the shots.

He didn’t know how William had gotten the proof of George’s involvement, but there on the arms of one of the men in the photograph was the mark around the man’s wrist that marked him as a Vito.

Snapping the file closed, he looked up at William. “Your brother had dirty dealings with the Vito club.”

"I have reason to believe that Ceaser, the man you were dealing with, is dead. The crew has been taken over by a man named Julio. You killed at least four of his men at the animal shelter."

"Why are you giving me this information?" Bull asked.

"They killed my brother. I received his severed fucking head in the mail at one of my salons. Craig was a fucking prick, but he was family. He should have been in rehab, but they got to him. While I was enjoying my dick getting sucked by a fucking expert, he was being tortured. I have yet to find the rest of his body," William said.

Again, his gaze went to Grant.

"Do you think the Chaos and Carnage MC is going to last? They were already working a dogfighting ring on your property. It's not going to take long before they remove you, Bull. They want Carnage."

Bull knew that was true. He ran a hand down his face, real fucking pissed.

"I need to talk to my club," Bull said. "Not tonight. They enjoy the party tonight."

"Then you better find me a room because I'm not leaving."

"You're not club."

"No, but seeing as I've given you the information you need, I've shown you that I'm on your side. I need to fucking kill this gang, once and for all. Do you know what I mean? I've got a head to bury, that's it. This is war to me, Bull."

"Then you can stay at the clubhouse, but your men have to go."

Guns were once again raised, and Bull had heard enough.

"Enough!" William yelled the word once again.

"Your men are connected to that trigger," he said.

"It's their job to be. Now if you're done, I've got a party to get back to."

"There's one more thing," William said, causing Bull to stop and turn toward the man who had delivered such bad fucking news on Halloween night.

He wasn't in the mood for fun and games. "What?" Bull asked.

"The sweet piece of ass you brought to the party. Is she yours?"

He clenched his hands. It would be so easy to wipe the floor with this fucker. "Why?"

“I’m just saying, Vito Crew isn’t run by a bunch of saints. They were in your town. They probably already know you have feelings for this woman. That you care for her deeply. They knew my brother was my whole world, and look what they did to him. I’ve looked into Julio, and he makes us look like saints, Bull. Your woman would be better off dead than at the mercy of these fuckers. They don’t just rape women and hurt them. They break them. They shatter their fucking souls. Death is a kindness. They never grant it.”

Bull looked at William and as he did, he imagined Maddie as a shell of herself. He hated the very thought of it.

“I’m returning to my party, do you understand? Then we will talk real business tomorrow.”

William held his hands up. “I’m on your side.”

He didn’t truly believe that. William was a fucking monster to the core. What made Bull pay attention to this new monster was that he was clearly fucking scared, and because of that, it was forcing him to reach out.

Vito Crew was a problem. He was very much aware of what they did to loved ones who turned against them. Just his meeting with William could have set them off.

“Bull, what are you doing to do?” Grant asked, coming toward him.

His brother was dressed up in a suit, looking like some kind of waiter but was probably going for a special agent or something.

“What I have to do,” he said.

None of the brothers stopped him as he walked back into the main clubhouse’s room. One look at him, and people moved out of his way.

He spotted Maddie at the bar, attempting to talk to Gaz, who had noticed him and stepped away.

Maddie lifted her bottle of beer and took a sip.

There was no way he could allow anything to happen to her. She was too fucking precious.

He made his way across the crowded room. The moment he was close, he cupped her face, tilted her head back, and kissed her.

She dropped the bottle she’d been holding, and her hands went to his sides.

“Bull,” she said when he broke the kiss.

There was no time to talk. He grabbed her hand and led her through the main clubhouse. After tonight, he wasn't going to get a chance like this again, and he wasn't happy about that.

Bull had her inside his office, the door slammed shut, and her pressed up against it within seconds.

Grabbing her hands, he moved them above her head and stared at her.

"What's going on?"

"Nothing. I just want you, Maddie. You know this, right? I told you once I got you in here, all bets were off." He reached between the valley of her breasts and yanked. The fabric tore easily, and her tits spilled out.

He flicked the catch of her bra, and then her heavy tits were within his palm, and he groaned as she whimpered.

"So fucking beautiful," he said.

Palming her tit, he let go of her hands above her head. "They stay there," he said.

She nodded, and then he took both of her tits in his hands, squeezing them tightly together. Her nipples were so large, and he couldn't resist sucking one into his mouth. The sweet sounds she made would stay with him forever.

He let go of her tits and tugged her costume off, wanting her bare for him and him alone.

Stroking her body, he reached between her thighs and touched her clit. He moved up, and as he fingered her clit, he sank his other hand into her hair, tilting her head back and slamming his lips down on hers.

From her clit, he moved toward her entrance and pressed a finger inside her. She gasped, and as he plundered her pussy, he took her mouth at the same time, plunging his tongue inside.

It wasn't enough. Nothing was ever enough with this woman. He'd been wanting her for so long, and now he finally had her, he didn't want to give her up, but he would have to. For her sake.

Releasing her pussy, he moved her across the bedroom toward his desk. He let her go long enough to swipe his arms across the desk, letting the files, the stationery, his name on a plaque, and the computer all fall to the floor, and then he bent her over it.

Her body shook just a little, but he didn't care.

Grabbing her ass, he spread her cheeks, and she gasped as he ran his fingers from her pussy up to her asshole.

There wasn't going to be any time to enjoy her ass, but he needed her pussy.

After opening his jeans, he eased down his boxer briefs and placed the tip at her tight pussy. In one long thrust, he was balls deep inside her. He held her ass cheeks open so he could see the way she took him. The opening of her cunt was so fucking sexy, and he wanted to look his whole fill so he didn't miss a thing.

She moaned his name. That was what he wanted. Over and over and over again.

Grabbing her hips, he began to rock into her. He started with slow thrusts, but they didn't last. He needed to imprint his brand on her skin, so she never for a single second forgot who she belonged to.

He fucked her harder than he ever had before.

Bull let go of her hips and wrapped her hair around his fist, drawing her back so she was pressed against him. Running his hand up her body, he cupped her tit.

All his.

Maddie belonged to him.

And for now, he was going to have to let her go, for her own safety.

Two days later

Something wasn't right.

Maddie hadn't seen Bull since the Halloween party. He had fucked her long into the night and then, out of nowhere, vanished, as if not to be seen.

She nibbled on her lip as she looked inside the garage. The gates were locked.

Pulling out the cell phone Bull had given to her, she found his number and called.

No answer.

She called Pat.

No answer.

The club had disappeared.

The garage was closed, and she didn't know why, nor why she had been told.

She rubbed at her temple.

Bull hadn't spoken to her, and she'd gotten used to him checking in with her. Other than her time in a coma, this was the first time he hadn't been with her.

She attempted to push on the gate, but it didn't give way.

Putting her hands through her coat, she stepped back and headed toward town. She would have to wait for him to call her. The weather had taken a horrible turn. It had been cold on Halloween, but now it was freezing. With each exhale, she saw her breath being carried on the wind. The wind whipped her hair back and forth.

As she neared the diner, she looked up and froze. In front of the diner was a row of bikes. She recognized Bull's bike first.

Why were they at the diner rather than at the garage?

Seeing Bull's bike made her smile though. She walked a little faster. She had missed him these past few days, and as she stepped into the diner, she glanced across the breakfast rush. What she saw made her freeze into place.

Bull had a woman sitting on his lap.

Maddie stopped. She had never seen him with another woman before.

Glancing down at her feet, she looked back up, and sure enough, he was still there. But this time, someone must have pointed her out.

"Excuse me, babe, I'll be right back," Bull said.

She kept her hands thrust into her coat as Bull came toward her, but he also picked up a box, which he held out to her.

"Here, this is all your shit," he said.

"What's going on?" she asked, knowing something bad was about to happen.

"Look, we had our fun, and it was fine while it lasted, but come on, you're you and I'm me."

Maddie took the box from him, not needing to know any more. "You're breaking up with me?"

"Yeah, well, come on. I guess I got over my need for a fat ass. You were a fat, Maddie. Nothing else."

She looked up at him, and at the sound of some laughter, she glanced over at his crew. They found this amusing.

"You're breaking up with me because I'm too fat?" she asked.

"Look, some guy is going to want ... that. It's not me. I'm sorry. I've found out what I really want. No guy wants a fat chick, ever."

Maddie held on to the box tighter. "I get it."

"You're not going to make a fucking scene, are you?"

She shook her head.

"Look, does anyone want to take this cunt?" Bull asked. "I can vouch that she's no longer a virgin."

Mortification ran through her. "Bull, stop it. I get it. I'm not your type. Please, stop."

"She is tight though, if you can get close enough."

Maddie couldn't take it anymore. She went to leave.

"That's enough," Beatrice said. "You and your disgusting filth can get the fuck out of my diner."

"I can leave," Maddie said.

"No, you're staying," Beatrice said. "You, take your piece of trash and get the fuck out."

The entire diner went quiet, and Maddie thought she was going to be sick.

There were so many people here. Several of them were laughing at her. This was worse than anything else she'd ever experienced in all her life. She had no idea Bull could be that cruel.

He'd pursued her. Not the other way around.

"I've got no problem what that. Keep the fatty. No one is going to want her." Bull grabbed the hand of the woman who'd been sitting on his lap, and left. She held herself perfectly still, not wanting to gain any attention as they all left the diner.

There were too many gazes, and tears filled her eyes, then spilled right on down her cheeks.

Beatrice wouldn't let her go though. She was pulled into the back of the diner. The box was taken out of her hands, and with them now free, she covered her face, needing a minute. Needing so much more than that.

"Look, some guy is going to want ... that. It's not me. I'm sorry. I've found out what I really want. No guy wants a fat chick, ever."

Embarrassment rushed through her. The ground was not doing a good job at opening up. She was losing herself so much.

“Hey, hey, don’t do that. Okay? No guy is worth that.” Beatrice rubbed her back, and Maddie shook her head.

“I need to go and start looking for a place to stay,” Maddie said. “I was staying with Bull, but that isn’t ... oh, God.” She felt like she was going to be sick.

Her head was pushed between her thighs, and Beatrice rubbed her back. “I’ve got you, darling. You don’t need to worry about finding a place to stay. You are more than welcome here.”

“I don’t want to impose on you.”

“It’s no imposition, okay? What that monster just did is unforgivable. Bull is a fucking asshole. I actually thought he was the nicest of the lot of them, but clearly, he’s not.”

“I didn’t chase after him,” she said. “He was the one who offered me a job.”

“I know. I know, sweetheart. Well, we are looking for a waitress and we have an apartment above the shop. It’s all yours,” Beatrice said.

Maddie lifted her gaze and was surprised to see Carl in the room as well. She offered him a smile. “Hey, Carl.”

“Hey ... Maddie.”

“I’m so sorry about causing this drama. I went to the garage and it was shut. I had no idea...” She couldn’t finish. Her lip quivered, and she glanced down at the floor. “I don’t get it. Everything was going good a few days ago.”

“Some men are only after one thing,” Beatrice said.

She didn’t want to think about what Bull had been after. He’d gotten it. She closed her eyes and her head felt like it was on fire.

“Er, about this apartment, can I ... would it be okay if I used it?” she asked. “And I’d like to take the job.”

“You can start tomorrow. There’s no reason for you to start today.”

From the staff room, they heard a call for someone to come and serve them.

“Carl, honey, get back out there. I’ll help Maddie up to the apartment, okay?”

“We can close for the day.”

“No, please, don’t do that for me,” Maddie said. “I wouldn’t want to impose.”

“You’re not imposing on anyone,” Beatrice said.

“Oh, okay.” Maddie nodded.

“But I think after we get Maddie settled, she’s going to want to rest. Aren’t you, sweetheart?”

“If that’s okay? I’ll start tomorrow, sooner rather than later. I promise.” She forced a smile to her lips, but it didn’t reach her eyes. Inside, she was heartbroken. There were no other nice words for it. Her life felt completely shattered.

Bull had come into her life like some angel, saving her, helping her, and he made her fall in love with him. That was the worst part about all of it. She had fallen for him so hard. The only saving grace she had was that she hadn’t told him.

He would have found that so fucking hilarious. She could imagine him and the club, thinking how easy and stupid she was.

Carl went back to the diner, and Beatrice showed her upstairs to the apartment. They had to go out back toward the entrance. They had barred entry into the main room after a previous tenant kept stealing from them.

Maddie promised to never steal from them, and Beatrice had chuckled.

The apartment was small, but it was nice. Fully furnished, so she didn’t have to worry about any of her old stuff.

“What is the rent?” Maddie asked.

“I’ll take it out of your paycheck. Don’t worry. We’ll talk about it later. I better go help Carl with the customers.” Beatrice moved toward her, wrapped her arms around her, and hugged her tightly. “I’m so glad I’m able to help you.”

Maddie forced a smile to her lips. “Thank you so much for your help. It means a lot to me.”

There was no lie to her words. She meant them.

With the door closed behind Beatrice, Maddie spun in a circle, looking at the apartment. Tears filled her eyes.

“Look, does anyone want to take this cunt? I can vouch that she’s no longer a virgin.”

Collapsing to the floor of the apartment, she covered her face and sobbed. She couldn't stop the tears. They kept on falling.

She didn't know how much time had passed. Curled up in a ball on the floor, she felt sick. Her stomach began to rumble, but she didn't listen to it.

The front door was knocked, and she heard Beatrice on the other side. The older woman didn't linger for long before leaving.

Maddie was relieved. She was so tired.

The tears finally stopped. Exhaustion filled her.

All she kept seeing were Bull's eyes. The mockery in them. She should have known he was lying to her all this time. He didn't find her attractive at all. His club probably put him up to it for a laugh.

Maddie glanced toward the window and saw it was dark outside.

You can stay on the floor, or get up and move around.

She wanted to stay on the floor and never move again. Bull had gotten under her skin, into her heart, and she hated it so damn much.

Lifting off the floor, she pressed her palm flat to the ground, and then another. She got all the way off the floor and stood.

She wasn't a quitter. She was a fighter.

Maddie slowly moved toward the window and closed the curtain. She did the same throughout the apartment. With her meltdown earlier, she didn't need to put any heating on.

Walking through the apartment, she saw there was a small kitchen, an even smaller bathroom, and a bedroom, along with a sitting room.

It wasn't much, but fortunately, it was better than the streets, which was where she'd be right now.

Bull hadn't been by his home for two days. Why did she even stay at his place?

She went to the bathroom, and there was a cracked mirror over the sink. Staring at her reflection, Maddie didn't like what she saw. Puffy eyes, red cheeks, and there was a sadness to her eyes.

This was what true heartache felt like.

"I'm fine," Maddie said.

She kept repeating the words in the hope they would finally stick.

Chapter Sixteen

One week later

Working at the diner wasn't so bad. Beatrice had a uniform for her, which had to be taken out as she was on the bigger size. The story of her life. Maddie got to work and was able to catch on quite quickly to the way they did things at the diner. There wasn't much in the way of training, but Beatrice was always there to help rectify any mistakes.

For the whole week, Beatrice and Carl were her rocks. They helped her to focus.

Some of the customers had heard about what happened and would make nasty retorts at her. She ignored them. It wasn't the first nor would it be the last time someone called her out about her weight. Her weight was always the first thing they noticed about her.

She'd come to see that. She wasn't just Maddie. No, she was the fat girl, the chunky one.

After her shift late on Friday, and another couple of customers laughing at her expense, Maddie didn't go straight to her apartment. Instead, she ended up walking through the town.

Thanksgiving was fast approaching, and in most shops, fall decorations and signs of the upcoming feast were heavily displayed.

She had thought she was spending Thanksgiving with Bull, but she put that thought to the back of her mind.

Maddie shoved her hands into her jacket and kept on walking. She wanted to forget the pain and the loneliness of what had happened to her. She hated this feeling more than anything.

No man had ever made her feel this way, and she should know seeing as she'd been turned down for so many dates.

At the sound of bikes fast approaching, Maddie froze. There was nowhere for her to go, and there was only one bunch of people who rode bikes around town, and they were all connected to the Chaos and Carnage MC.

Glancing to her right, she saw the sign for the gym.

It was enter the gym or see Bull. She had gone a week without seeing him, and the thought of seeing him now, well, it terrified her.

Maddie walked into the gym, allowing the door to close right behind her as the first bike rode on past.

Her heart raced, and she leaned against the door. Closing her eyes for a few seconds, she composed herself.

“Can I help you?” a male voice said.

Opening her eyes, she came face to face with male perfection. He was dressed in gym wear, a tight tee, and a pair of sweatpants, that again, were rather tight-fitting. If she even attempted to wear something like that, she would be kicked out for indecency. No one wanted to see her lump and bumps.

“Er, I...” She had no idea what to say. She’d never been inside of a gym before. Glancing past his shoulder, she saw some of the workout equipment, running machines, bikes, and there appeared to be something to do with weights as well.

“Look, some guy is going to want ... that. It’s not me. I’m sorry. I’ve found out what I really want. No guy wants a fat chick, ever.”

“Here comes the chubby bitch.”

“Fat cunt on the loose.”

“Don’t let her fall on you, she’ll squish you.”

“No one is ever going to want you, Maddie. You’re too fat and too ugly.”

Each horrible taunt rolled around in her head. After years of hearing what a disgusting person she was, she had to believe it.

“Er, do you think you could help fix this?” she asked.

“Fix what?” The man looked slightly confused.

Maddie grabbed her jacket and opened it up. She wore her diner uniform that was way too tight, and she was waiting for the size upgrade. “This.”

The man stared at her, and she waited.

No one else was around, and she just wanted to know if she was wasting her time. Pushing her jacket closed, she shook her head.

“Forget it,” she said.

She went to turn away, but he grabbed her arm and spun her around.

“No, you don’t have to leave. Is someone outside, following you?”

“No. No one is following me.” *No one wants me.*

“How about we go and discuss this in my office,” he said.

“Can you help me?” she asked.

“I need us to sit down and to figure out what you want. My name is Jase,” he said.

He held out his hand, and she stared at him for a few seconds, not really sure what to do.

Shake his hand, duh.

Putting her hand within his, she forced a smile to her lips. “Hello, I’m ... Maddie.”

His grip was firm. The moment he let her go, she shoved her hands back into her coat, and he held his hand out for her to follow. Stepping in beside him, she couldn’t help but feel out of place. He led her away from the workout equipment, and they went to a room with his name on it, which she assumed was his office.

Sitting down in the chair opposite him, she noticed there was no clutter around. Only a couple of pieces of artwork were on the walls, and they were still forms of men and women. They looked perfect, as she imagined most people who came here were.

She’d never been to the gym. Had always been afraid to even step foot inside one.

“Please, take a seat,” he said.

She perched down in a chair and tried not to feel odd.

“Shouldn’t I meet with a personal trainer?” she asked.

Jase sat down. The tips of his fingers pressed against one another. “I will be your personal trainer. A slot has opened up three days a week. Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays. They will be yours if we can find out why you wish to begin at my gym.”

“What do you mean?”

He leaned forward, resting his palms on the table. “I have been in this business a long time. If you’re here to lose weight because of a boyfriend, then you can leave. I need to know your reason for stepping foot inside that door.”

She wasn’t going to tell him it was to hide from a boyfriend. The one she was still very much in love with and who had broken her heart.

Maddie pushed some of her hair out of her face. “I ... I’m here for me,” she said. “I’m tired of everyone judging me at size value. It doesn’t matter if I’m a nice person, kind, all they see is the size, and I’m tired of it.

I've tried diets. They don't work. I want to stick to a good regime, and I guess this would be the best place, wouldn't it?"

"I'm going to give you a month probationary period. It means I won't charge you, and if you decide this isn't for you, you can, of course, leave at any time."

"Okay," Maddie said.

"I will start tonight if you are free. We can take your measurements, set goals. I will arrange a brand-new diet for you. I warn you, Maddie, I get results for those who want it."

"I want it," Maddie said.

Jase looked her over and nodded. "Then I guess we better get to it."

The next hour was horrible. Bull's breakup was still the most mortifying event of her life. She didn't allow herself to think about him as she stepped on the scales or as Jase wrapped a measuring tape around her body. He didn't show any sign that he hated what he was doing, or what he felt about her.

She turned left and right, moved around as he asked her questions.

Each machine scared her even more than the last, until finally, they sat back in his office. She clasped her hands together, trying not to feel sick.

"Do you have any goal in mind?" he asked.

"I don't know."

This was all spur of the moment to her. She hadn't planned to come to the gym at all.

"I want to start with you straight away. Tomorrow is Thursday, so that's what we're going to be working on. We're going to start with a warmup, getting your body used to exercise." He wheeled back toward his filing cabinets and opened the bottom one. "And this is the diet plan I'd like you to work on."

He handed it to her.

"Minimal fat and carbs," she said.

"Yes. I would also recommend changing to wholemeal with everything. Pasta, bread, rice, that kind of thing. All the details are in the paperwork." He reached for a business card. "Here is my number. If you are in any doubt, all you have to do is call me. I will warn you, Maddie, I like to be hands-on with everything. Do not hesitate at all. I'm the best friend you never had."

She held the card in her hand. "Okay," she said.

"So, I will call for you tomorrow morning."

Her gaze widened. "Morning?"

"Yes. We will go for a morning run, and then tomorrow afternoon, say around six, you will come to the gym. We'll start at one hour and see how we go."

"Yes, of course. A run and gym time."

He chuckled. "Remember, you can end this at any time. I'm not going to force you to do something you don't want to do."

"It's not that at all. I want to do this." In fact, the more he talked, the more she wanted to.

"Good. Welcome aboard, Maddie." He stood and offered his hand.

She shook his and stepped back. "Thank you."

"I'll see you out."

She quickly checked the time. A good hour and a half had passed. There wouldn't be any sign from Bull and his crew now, surely.

Jase walked her out of the gym, and she noticed it was completely empty and the doors were locked.

"I'm so sorry for keeping you so long."

"Please, don't worry about it."

She nibbled on her lip. "I didn't mean to keep you so long."

"Maddie, it's fine. I run a business and I know to help people who come at all hours of the day and night." He winked at her. "I'll see you tomorrow morning."

"Right, yes, of course, you will." She forced a smile and turned on her heel. The card in her hand felt heavy for some reason, but she kept on moving.

Walking across the street, she headed back toward the diner.

She hadn't been so lucky. Bull and his crew were straddling their bikes near the diner. They weren't allowed inside but there were other takeout places available.

She shoved her hand back into her jacket, ignored them, and walked around the back. The hairs on the back of her neck stood on end, but she ignored the impulse to look behind her.

Running up the steps to her apartment, she grabbed her keys, jammed them in the lock, and flicked the catch.

Maddie slammed the door closed and leaned against it.

"It's fine. I'm fine."

The curtains were open, and she rushed toward them and drew them closed, stopping herself from looking down at him. He didn't deserve her attention, and she kept the curtains closed.

"I'm fine. I will always be fine."

She walked past the kitchen and went straight to the bathroom. Staring at her reflection, she saw the darkness beneath her eyes. She didn't look well-rested.

Removing the waitress uniform, she glanced at her body in the mirror and hated what she saw. It was the first time she had ever done that.

Now she saw what everyone else did, and it shamed her.

She stepped beneath the cold spray of the shower.

Soon, no one would be able to throw what she looked like in her face.

The following morning, Maddie was prepared for the knock at her door. She wore a pair of sweatpants and a large sweater. Her hair was pulled back into a ponytail.

Jase was dressed similarly, only he had a hat on.

"Ah, you're ready. This is what I like to see from my clients."

"I haven't run in a long time," she said.

"Do not worry about it. We're going to start slowly and build it up."

Maddie nodded. She stepped out into the cold, pocketed her keys, and followed him down the steps.

"Now, I want you to start doing some stretches."

He began to show her how to warm up her body, and she attempted to copy him, but he eventually moved behind her, putting his hands on her hips and moving her left, to right, holding her stomach and showing her how to bend and stretch without risking pulling a muscle or tearing anything.

She did as he instructed, and at one point, he stared at her, and she was a little nervous about it.

"What's the matter?" she asked.

"Oh, nothing. Just ... you've got good strength. Okay, let's go," he said.

He started out at a slow jog, and Maddie was able to keep up with him. She hated that it wasn't long before she was out of breath, but she didn't stop.

She wasn't going to fall down at the first hurdle. She kept on moving, trying to keep up with him. When they came near a park that had some climbing frames, swings, and other apparatuses for the kids to play on, along with a huge-ass field, Maddie thought he would take it easy, but he didn't. They ran the lap around the field. She had no choice but to stop as there was a stitch at her side.

A groan left her, but she kept on moving, determined to not give up.

Jase had already finished as she caught up to him. He wasn't out of breath, and she ended up on the ground, panting, making some very distressing noises as she did.

This wasn't fun. This wasn't easy.

"You're trying to kill me," she said.

"Actually, I'm trying to train your body to be ready for everything."

"You're still standing, and I'm on the ground, struggling to breathe. This is not preparing for everything." She put her hands on her chest, trying to calm herself.

He chuckled and stood over her.

She groaned. "You're liking this way too much."

"I've been very impressed with how you've handled everything so far. Not many people can take on a run their first day in."

"So this was just for me?"

"The first couple of weeks, I've got to get a sense of what you can take."

Maddie lifted her hands to her face, feeling the beads of sweat. "It's freezing cold and I'm sweating."

"That's good news."

He moved her thigh, and he suddenly stood between her legs, his large palms on her thighs. "How are you feeling?" he asked.

"Fine. What are you doing?" She tried to pull away, but he placed a palm on her stomach.

"I don't want you to pull a muscle or to do any damage. I'm simply checking you over."

"Oh, okay." She didn't like his touch.

Since Bull, she had sworn off all men. It wasn't just Bull, it was the missed dates, the shitty ones. She wanted nothing to do with any one of them.

"You're very tense," he said.

"I'm not used to men touching me." She closed her eyes and lifted her head. "Please, don't take that personally or anything."

"Nothing personal taken. You do need to learn to relax though."

"To relax? How? I feel like I'm dying."

"Well, you're not." He gave her thigh a slight tap. "There you go. You're good to go."

Maddie got to her feet, feeling tired, but good. It was an odd sensation.

"Are you ready to head back?"

"Walk or run?" She tried not to flinch at the thought of running again.

"We'll walk."

"Walking. Good. I can walk." She matched his steps as they headed back toward her place.

"Even though we're only having three classes a week, there's nothing to stop you from coming to the gym whenever you need it."

"Thanks. I don't know if I want to step inside a gym right now." She smiled at him.

Jase chuckled. "It can be a body adjustment, but it's all for a good cause."

"Thank you."

She hadn't noticed on the way to the park that they'd passed Chaos and Carnage Mechanics. The gates were open, and with one quick glance inside, she saw Bull and Pat. They stood next to a vehicle, talking.

Maddie quickly averted her gaze.

"You know them?" Jase asked.

"Er, the ... owner, we, I mean, I, it's complicated."

"Ah, bad breakup."

"I guess we would've had to be going together for it to be a breakup. I don't know what we were, but he made it perfectly clear I'm not what he wanted." She picked up her speed, wanting to get back to her apartment and then to work.

The pain in her chest had nothing to do with the workout and everything to do with seeing Bull.

Jase walked her to the metal staircase leading to her apartment. "I'll see you tonight around six."

"Yes, I will be there."

"Good. Take care." He turned on his heel and left.

Maddie didn't wait around to watch him go. She walked up the stairs, taking them slowly and gripping the rail a little harder than she needed to.

Her legs felt like jelly.

Inside her new apartment, she leaned against the door.

Bull had looked fine. The short glance she had of him, she saw that he was ... happy.

She closed her eyes, pressed her lips together, and clenched her hands into tight fists. "It's fine. I am fine. Everything is fine."

It was all a big, fat lie.

Opening her eyes, she tried not to think of the pain, of his horrible yet truthful words. It wasn't like she'd never heard something like that before. All her life, people had told her how her weight didn't match up, or her looks. She was ugly and fat.

She went to the bathroom, stripped out of her clothes, and took a quick shower. With the clock ticking, she didn't want to be late for work.

She finished her shower in quick time, changed into her uniform, and headed into the diner.

Beatrice liked the morning rush, and she was behind the main counter, ringing up customers as they approached. Maddie gave her a smile, grabbed her apron from around the back, said morning to Carl, and got to work.

The diner was always a popular place, and what she loved most was that there was no time for chitchat. Everyone always had something to do.

She got a few nasty comments, but she pretended not to hear them.

Since Beatrice had kicked out the Chaos and Carnage MC, there was no risk of her bumping into any of them.

"I feel like we don't get time to talk," Beatrice said at around three in the afternoon.

Maddie chuckled. "Don't you love it like this?" She sure did. Moving from table to table, she did the same job, but with each new customer, it

was different.

By five thirty, she was exhausted, but it was the end of her shift. She said goodbye to Beatrice and Carl, heading out of the diner. She went around the back to her home and walked upstairs.

She didn't have time to dawdle.

Changing into a new set of workout clothes, she didn't bother to shower before heading toward the gym.

She was so nervous.

This wasn't the place for her, but she forced herself to enter the large building. There weren't many people around, but Jase was at the front desk, glancing through some files when she entered.

The clock showed it to be exactly six o'clock.

"Hey," Maddie said.

He looked up, and the frown he had disappeared. "Maddie, hi." He closed the files and placed them in the cabinet behind him.

"I'm not too late?"

"You're right on time." He clicked his pen shut and rounded the counter. "Come on, I'll get you set up on a warmup. This is what you will do every single time you come here to be trained."

He pointed out the ladies' changing room, then waited for her on the opposite side that gave her access to the rest of the gym.

There were one or two people, but not a whole lot, and she was more than thankful. She didn't know if she could stand to work out surrounded by a lot of people.

Jase surprised her by not taking her straight to a bunch of machines, but instead, to a large, open mat.

"You're going to start stretching. Like this morning, but I want you to focus on warming yourself up. Did you have a good workday today?" he asked.

"Yes, I did. Is that relevant?"

"No, it's not. I just making small talk."

"Ah, okay. Then, yes, it was busy. I like busy."

"You do?" he asked.

Maddie nodded.

"Care to share why?"

She shook her head. "No reason. I just like to stay busy. I'm sure you have a lot of busy clients."

"That we do." He smiled. "So, do you think you can do this every day before you start to work out?"

"Yeah, I can. Why do we do this?"

"It stops you from causing yourself an injury. Warming up is really important, and I don't want you to skip it."

He led the way through the gym. "I figured we could get started on the treadmill."

"Ah, yes. Running but not on real land." She smiled.

Jase chuckled. "Funny."

He pressed the buttons, and she started at a slow walk.

As she did this, he walked around the treadmill, watching her. "I'm checking to make sure your movements are correct and you don't need any other guidance on how to properly hold yourself."

"Makes sense."

She hated being observed, but after a few minutes, she was able to forget about it.

He sped the machine up.

She went from walking to a faster pace, until eventually, she was full-out running. This, fortunately, didn't last, as she told him to stop.

Holding on to the handlebars of the treadmill, she tried to catch her breath. "I'm sorry," she said.

"Why are you apologizing?"

"I can't do it."

"No one expects you to be perfect on your first day. I pushed you a little. That's all. Come on, let's take it easy. I'm thinking some weight lifts."

That didn't sound like a good idea.

It wasn't.

He got her on some kind of machine. She was too busy trying not to panic to hear the name of the machine, but he got her to sit down, and then using her feet, she had no choice but to lift the weights. She couldn't handle it.

"No, no, I need, there has to be something a little easier. I don't know, like swimming? Can I just do some swimming?" she asked.

“Er, yeah, sure, of course. We can do the swimming routine. Do you have a swimsuit?”

Maddie groaned. “I’m going to die.”

“We have some,” he said.

“Oh, please, in my size?” she asked.

“Yes, we have them in a lot of different sizes.” He helped her off the machine and she swore she was never lifting weights again.

He walked back toward the women’s changing room, and there was a closet. She waited as he entered, and seconds later, he came out with two different swimsuits. One was a full-piece, the second was a two-piece.

She opted for a full-piece.

Everything inside her was screaming for her to run back to her apartment, to be safe, but she didn’t. She changed into the one-piece bathing suit and went out to where Jase was waiting.

Chapter Seventeen

Bull had seen Maddie running alongside that piece-of-shit gym person. He didn't know his name, but he'd seen him around. Some of the women from the club frequented his gym, and he heard them talking about him.

When they came back, walking and talking, Bull tensed up, and Pat grabbed his arm. He didn't even realize he'd been about to intervene until his man stopped him.

"Don't. You don't know who's watching. You're doing this to protect her."

Maddie had looked at him though. Those gorgeous brown eyes had filled with tears as she glanced at him.

Damn it.

William's information had been accurate. Vito's Crew had been taken over by Julio, and with what he found out about that man, letting Maddie go until he solved this was the best solution for both of them. But that didn't stop him fucking aching for her.

He'd told Pat he intended to end things, but in his heart, he wasn't fucking over. Pat had told him he was going to need to break her heart. Grant was there as well and had agreed. Bull had known the only way to hurt Maddie, to show it was over, was to hurt her where she was weakest.

Bull loved her curves. He fucking craved them, and he'd called her names that left a bitter taste in his mouth. Not just in his mouth, but deep in his fucking soul.

It had been over a week, and he couldn't even stay at his house. There were too many memories with Maddie. He hadn't wanted Maddie to be alone, which was why he'd picked the diner to end things with her.

Beatrice and Carl didn't know the truth of their breakup, but at least he'd given the older couple a chance to be near their daughter. Maddie had no clue that the people she lived with before were her adoptive parents. How Beatrice had gotten pregnant at a young age with Carl's baby, and they'd been too young. The truth was that the young couple had been manipulated by two old nasty pieces of work who had no right having kids.

Maddie deserved more.

With her close to her real parents, there was a chance of Maddie being happy.

Seeing her today, he knew she was falling apart.

"I need a minute," Bull said.

He pulled out of Pat's hold and went to his office. Closing the door, he grabbed his cell phone.

Pat, with his connections to the military, had been able to get some surveillance equipment. When Maddie had been busy at the gym, Pat had gone in covertly and installed several security cameras into her room.

He'd given Bull the codes and the apps to view them on a separate phone. No one knew what he saw. This was between him and Pat.

Bull clicked on the cameras, and it showed her entering her apartment. She leaned against the door.

"It's fine. I'm fine."

For the past week, it was the same mantra he heard. That and tears. Maddie had cried so fucking hard. It broke his heart because he was the cause.

Each tear would be paid for in Vito blood. He would see the end of the fucking cartel in his life. They had taken the piss out of him for the last time.

Maddie moved toward the bathroom, giving him no choice but to click on each camera as she walked through her apartment.

It was a nice place.

He'd been sure to drop a hint to Beatrice to wait for a suitable candidate to put in their apartment. Everything had fallen into place way too fucking neatly.

He was so angry.

She stripped out of her clothes, and seeing her body made his dick hard. She was supposed to be in his bed.

Part of him wanted her to be pregnant so he had an excuse to be in her life, but so far, that hadn't happened. He hadn't been careful when it came to the condoms, so her not being pregnant was just sheer fucking luck.

There was a knock at his door, and he had no choice but to stop looking at his woman. The ache inside his gut would never go. Not until she was safely back in his arms.

"Come in," he said.

Grant entered his office.

Since he'd gotten rid of Maddie, Grant had stuck around. His brother knew the truth though. He knew Bull wanted Maddie more than anything else in the world.

"How are you doing?" Grant asked.

"Have you got any information for me?"

"The land was owned by a shell company. I've got to find someone willing to do a little more digging. My guy was spooked."

"Too spooked for a paycheck?" Bull asked.

"I don't think it's going to take a genius to realize it's owned by the Vito Crew. Julio's associates, that we know of, their names kept being dropped into the conversation. My guy got scared. People who dig tend to dig their own grave, and he told me he very much liked his life."

Bull nodded. "Okay, so we know without real proof that the land was sold to Julio, but I want to know who owned it originally."

"That's proving to be a little more difficult. The main sale is very private. This didn't even go up on the market for sale, Bull."

"That seems odd. A good piece of prime land. People don't just let that slide. They go in for the kill."

"Exactly. I'm looking into it."

"I want you to investigate the owner of the gym," he said.

"Bull?"

"Don't start with me. She's going to the fucking gym. And I've seen her with that asshole too many times to count."

"What will you do if she dates someone else?"

Bull picked up the nearest thing to him, which happened to be a stapler, and launched it across the room.

"I wasn't expecting that reaction," Grant said.

"Look, I know you want to be part of this. I know you've got the skills I need, but William's brother has no body. He doesn't get to bury his brother. Piece by piece of Craig is being sent to him in the mail. I know we've had our differences, but I can't let anything happen to you."

"Then why don't you expel me from the club?" Grant asked.

"What?"

"I know you care about Maddie, and you're not going to want her going with anyone else. I'm your only chance of that happening. Kick me

out of the club. I can hang out with Maddie.”

Bull shook his head. “No. That wouldn’t work.”

“Why not?”

“You were never friends with Maddie, and all of a sudden you’re hanging out with my ex? It wouldn’t work.”

“Unless it looks like I’m trying to win her over.”

Bull’s hand clenched into a fist.

“Calm the fuck down, okay? I don’t have any feelings for Maddie. None, but I saw the way she looked at you, and how you looked at her. I get it. You’re fucking besotted with her.”

“I’m in love with her, Grant. This isn’t some stupid school crush.”

Grant held his hands up. “I get it, but don’t you want someone you can trust? Just because you’ve kicked her to the curb for those who care to look doesn’t mean someone isn’t looking at her at all times. I swear to protect her and you. For the club, for us. I can do the digging in my own time.”

Bull looked at his brother. “How?”

His brother shrugged. “I don’t fucking know.”

“The club can’t know about it,” Bull said.

“Why not?”

“They’d treat you differently. You know this.”

“Fuck, you’re right. So it would just be me and you knowing that I’m a full-fledged club brother, and that I’m out there to protect your woman.”

Bull didn’t like it. This was risky, and he said as much to Grant.

“We’ve got nothing to lose. You need someone to keep an eye on Maddie, and to be able to keep on looking without anyone checking me out. Just don’t get killed.”

Bull ran a finger across his lip. He didn’t like Maddie being alone. He certainly didn’t trust the guy at the gym. The thought of his brother being anywhere near her didn’t even fill him with confidence.

“You’re only there to keep an eye on her. Nothing else.”

“Got it. What’s the best way of removing me from the club without requiring a vote?” Grant asked.

Bull sat back and stared at his brother.

“Taking drugs?”

“No, several of the guys took drugs when I took over. I didn’t allow for their removal. They underwent a lot of rehabilitation.”

“A rat?”

“That would get you killed and you know it.”

“How about confirmation of me talking to the cartel?” Grant asked. “Only talking with a hint of possibly taking over.”

“You know that’s risky,” Bull said.

“Life is risky. I don’t imagine this shit is going to be waiting around for too long. You’ve got to get a lead on this Vito situation. Julio isn’t going to be in the dark forever.”

Ranford wanted to take the war to Julio, but Bull had convinced him to wait, to lay low. To allow the Vito Crew to get comfortable and then they would become sloppy, and together, they’d make their move.

So far, Julio was smart. He hadn’t done anything to warrant suspicion.

Bull looked at his brother. This was dangerous because the club could seek vengeance.

“When do you want to start this?” he asked.

“Today,” Grant said. “Let’s face it, I came to you and asked for a word. It could be the final straw. The guys wouldn’t request a vote. I’ve been a pain in your ass, if you count me calling you out.”

“Are you a good enough actor?”

“The best.”

Bull got to his feet. “You better keep her fucking safe.”

“Will do. It’ll be a piece of cake.”

“Good.” He grabbed his brother’s arm, opened his office door, and threw him out. Bull had never considered himself much of an actor. Life rarely gave him chance to, but when it came to Maddie’s safety, there was no taking risks. He had to do what was best to protect her.

Grant landed on the ground.

“You give me that cut, you piece of shit.”

“No, it’s worth taking a vote for,” Grant said, spitting up at him.

Bull smiled and drew his foot down on Grant’s balls. His brother curled up in a ball, groaning.

“I know none of my guys want a piece of shit who would consider selling out his club president, let alone his own brother to the cartel just so he could overthrow him. If you don’t like the way I run things, then you can

take your dick to the streets.” With that, he pulled the leather cut from his body. “This is showing you mercy. If I see your face again, you’re not going to like what I do to it.” He spat on the ground, and Grant didn’t argue.

He rushed away, going out of the garage. and Bull watched him go.

Pat, Sweet, and Rip were in the shop, and they all came toward him.

Bull didn’t say a word as his club brothers surrounded him. He had a feeling Pat probably knew what had gone down, but as for the rest, they only saw a traitor.

He hoped Grant knew what he was doing.

One week later

It had gone from three runs a week with Jase, to six, and she was still only seeing him at the gym three days a week. Her body ached, but it was in a good way. She was so happy because the uniform Beatrice and Carl had given her finally fit. Jase had told her when she started to change her habits, she would see a quick change, and that would peter out and slow down. She didn’t mind. Maddie loved the fact her uniform wasn’t gaping.

She hadn’t dared go on the scales, nor use a measuring tape to see if she’d lost any inches. So, instead, she was just happy about her clothes.

“You look happy,” Beatrice said when she entered.

“I am. I feel good.”

Even though she was running every single day, she was still collapsing at the end of it, causing Jase to give her legs a small massage. She didn’t like his touch one bit, and it often made her even more tense than the run.

Pulling her hair back into a ponytail, she wrapped a band around it.

This was a good day. Nothing was going to upset her.

Wrapping the apron around her waist, she walked into the main dining room to see it was busy. Beatrice was ahead of her.

“No, hell no, you and your trash can get the hell out of my diner,” Beatrice said.

Maddie tensed up. She couldn’t help it.

Nibbling on her lip, she walked past Beatrice to see who was causing her stress, and she was shocked to see Grant sitting at the bar, all on his own, which made no sense.

“I’m not here to cause trouble.”

“Where is that bastard brother of yours?” Beatrice asked.

“I have no idea. You will have to ask him.”

Grant glanced at her, and his eyes seemed to go wide for a second, and then he looked her up and down. “Maddie,” he said.

“Grant.”

She walked away from him, going to take the first orders.

After finishing up her third table, she went to the back toward Carl, where Beatrice waited for her.

“Grant’s not part of the club anymore,” Beatrice said.

“Oh, that’s odd.”

“Bull kicked him out. He’s not here to cause trouble. He’s looking for a place to stay and a job, that’s all. I can’t give him any of those things, but I can let him have a coffee while he enjoys his search. Is that okay?” Beatrice asked.

“Why are you asking me? This is your diner.”

“I don’t want you to be uncomfortable.”

“Honestly, I’m fine. I’ve got no reason to be uncomfortable. He’s just ... a guy.” She offered a smile.

There was no way she was going to tell Beatrice that he made her life a living hell back in high school. Besides, she was the grown-up, and could get past it. Grant was the asshole.

She walked back through the main diner, going around the counter to grab the coffee pot.

Turning back to Grant, she hesitated. She was going to ignore him, but now that she saw him, she couldn’t walk away. “Do you want some more coffee?” she asked.

“I’d love some.” He smiled at her.

She didn’t smile back.

He held out his coffee cup for her to pour.

“There’s cream and sugar there,” she said, pointing to the side of the mug.

“Wait, Maddie. I wanted to see how you were doing,” he said.

She held the handle of the coffee pot tightly. “Excuse me?”

“I know things have never been easy for us. My brother can be quite the asshole, and I get it. I understand if you don’t want to talk to me.”

Maddie smiled. "Your brother broke my heart, humiliated me, and the last thing I want to do is talk to his brother. You may be out of the club, but..." She pressed her lips together. "I don't want to talk to you."

Grant didn't leave all morning.

For the most part, she ignored him, only offering him coffee when she had to. He didn't budge.

Not once.

It was Tuesday, so she had the gym tonight. They were a few days away from Thanksgiving, and Beatrice had let her know they were going to open up the diner and offer dinner for those that didn't feel like cooking it. She had told her it was going to be one big happy family, and it sounded like a lot of fun. Also, the prospect of spending the day alone didn't thrill her one bit.

Grant didn't leave all day.

By five, it was the end of her shift. She said her goodbyes to Beatrice and Carl before heading to her apartment. She didn't shower but changed into her gym kit, then headed to see Jase.

Like always, he was at the front desk when she entered.

The moment she walked in, he held up a swimsuit. "We're spending the next hour in the water."

She rolled her eyes but took the swimsuit.

Entering the women's changing rooms, she found a stall and stripped out of her clothes, quickly sliding the swimsuit into place. She hated how much of her body it showed off, but that was the point of coming to the gym.

She found a locker, stuffed her clothes inside, and secured the key around her ankle.

When she made it to the pool, Jase was already in.

A couple of people were swimming. She went to the stairs and stepped into the water, letting out a little gasp as he grabbed her hips, helping her down.

"Oh, you didn't have to do that," she said.

"I don't mind."

She moved out of his touch and went to the center of the pool where they normally were.

"How was your day?"

“Fine. You?”

“Busy.”

“Is that why we get to be in the pool?”

“Yes. I want to start getting warmed up, and then we’ll do a few laps.”

Maddie took the twenty minutes to get warmed up, following Jase’s directions, and then, she was swimming breaststroke alongside him. It didn’t take him long to get ahead of her, and she took her own pace, loving the feel of the water around her body.

Memories of Bull’s hands on her body were a little distracting, and after doing ten laps, she clung to the side of the pool, hoping to gain her composure.

Jase was behind her.

His hands pulled some of her hair off her neck. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m fine. Just ... a bad day, I guess.”

“Do you want to do some backstroke laps?” he asked.

She was tempted to say no, but that would be giving in, and she refused to do that. “Yes.”

“Okay, let’s do this.”

They swam together until it was her time to call an end to it. Jase gave her some cool-down exercises, and then she was free to go. She’d never been so grateful for climbing out of a pool.

She took her time changing, and Jase waited to take the swimsuit from her. He promised it got washed between sessions, and she wasn’t the only person he trained to wear it.

“Do you want me to walk you home?” Jase asked.

“Nah, that’s okay.” She noticed this time a couple more people had stuck around. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Bright and early.”

She smiled and left the gym, so tired.

It was way too cold outside to be taking her time lingering. Shoving her hands in her coat, she took off, running toward her home. The paths and roads had been gritted because of the snowfall and the ice.

She finally made it around to her building when she heard some noise near the trash bins.

“Hello,” she said. “Who’s there?”

Maddie took a step toward the bins and gasped as a large figure came from behind.

"It's me," Grant said.

"Grant?"

"The one and only."

She frowned at him. An overhead light cast enough of a glow for her to see him. "What are you doing?" she asked.

"I'm ... I'm looking for a place to stay." He shoved his hands in his jacket pocket, and she looked at him, really looked at him, and saw that he looked a little less for wear. Stains covered his sweatpants and shirt. The jacket was also filthy.

"Behind the dumpster?"

"I have nothing, Maddie. My brother kicked me out of the club and out of his life. Look, I made a mistake, but I went to tell him about it. I didn't expect things to escalate the way they had."

"With him kicking you out for being what I think of as a traitor."

"I'm not a traitor. I saw an opportunity and I took it. Doesn't mean I don't think how fucked up that is now." He shrugged. "I don't have a place to stay. The diner is nice and warm, and I figured it would be warm late at night."

"Where have you been staying before now?" she asked.

"Where I can."

Everything in Maddie told her not to give in to him. He was a bully. A real nasty piece of work when he could start. She didn't like him, but seeing him now, she couldn't allow anything to happen to him. He was Bull's brother, and even though they weren't talking, she had a feeling he'd be upset if anything happened to Grant.

"I ... I have a sofa and a shower you can use."

"What?"

"This isn't permanent," she said. "I don't want to live with you, or share a room with you."

"That's fine."

"And don't go bringing women back to my place either."

Grant held his hands up. "Promise. I will be a good little boy."

She wrinkled her nose, turned away from him, and headed upstairs to her apartment.

What the hell are you doing?

Are you insane?

You hate him.

Let him freeze.

Just because he was never nice to you doesn't mean you stoop to his level.

She hated her reasoning.

Her hands shook slightly from all of the exercise, and it was a struggle to unlock the door. This had only happened once before, and Jase had been there to help.

Grant took the key from her and slid it into the lock.

"Thank you."

"You shouldn't work out so much if it causes you to shake like that."

"I'm fine."

She didn't want to talk about her weight loss with one of the people who was always happy to tell her how disgusting she was.

She paused and glanced at him watching her.

"How did you know I was working out?"

"I've seen you with that asshole from the gym. Is anything going on between the two of you?"

She frowned. "What? No. He's my trainer. Nothing more." Slamming the door closed, she flicked the lock and turned on the lights. "I'm going to take a shower and then you can have a shower. I'll make up the sofa for you to sleep."

Maddie went to walk around him, but he grabbed her arm.

"Thank you," he said.

She pulled out of his hold. "You don't have to thank me."

"I know what he did must have hurt."

"Let me make one thing very, very clear. Under no circumstances are you to talk about him or anything to do with him. I don't want to hear anything."

"Oh," he said.

"Bull doesn't mean anything to me." She went to the bathroom, slamming the door closed and leaning against it.

If Bull meant nothing to her, why was she helping his brother out, giving him a place to stay? It made no sense. She closed her eyes and took

several deep breaths. She could do this.

It would be easy.

A piece of cake.

Chapter Eighteen

It wasn't a piece of cake.

Grant ... was a pain in the ass.

First of all, he seemed to enjoy a beauty routine first thing in the morning, and she was nearly late for work on the first day. He insisted on coming for the run with her and Jase. She shouldn't have been surprised that he was at the peak of fitness, but he was.

At the end of the run, Maddie collapsed to the ground as it had been a struggle to keep up with the two men who seemed determined to compete with each other. It was exhausting to be near them.

Jase started to massage her leg muscles, and much to her disgust, Grant attempted the same thing. She hated his touch. If she was honest, she hated both of their touches.

That was just Wednesday morning.

By Wednesday lunchtime, Grant also had a job working at the diner. Beatrice didn't even know how it happened, but he worked around back with Carl, so at least she didn't see him.

Within the space of twenty-four hours, Grant had somehow become part of her life, and she didn't like it.

By Thursday morning, Jase had already called to let her know the run wasn't on that day. During festive events, he had family to go and see, and they didn't appreciate his need to keep a strict structure. The gym was closed that day, but she didn't mind as she already had plans to spend her day at the diner.

Stepping into the bathroom, she looked up and caught sight of Grant naked in the shower, on the verge of getting out.

Maddie screamed and slapped her hands over her eyes. "What the hell? Why didn't you lock the door?"

"Why would I do that? We're roomies."

"Grant, you're sleeping on my sofa. This place isn't big enough for the two of us."

"Sure, it is. Come on, aren't you having a little fun with me?"

She had come to know this apartment by heart. Spinning on her heel, she found her way out of the door and headed straight toward her bedroom. Her hair didn't need to be tied back today.

Beatrice had said it was a more relaxed style, to give the customers the at-home feeling. She recommended coming in her own clothes, and to use an apron for the risk of spillages.

Without waiting for Grant, she grabbed her keys and headed out. She had no choice but to make a set for Grant as well.

How had he become part of her life in a short time?

She wanted to kick the dumpster on the way past, but she didn't.

Instead, she walked into the diner, and already it was a sight to behold. Quite a few customers were there for the morning of special pumpkin pancakes, waffles, and special syrup. Carl took great pride in telling her he added fall spices to the syrup to give it that special taste.

Carl liked to tell her all his foodie secrets, and she did get a lot of enjoyment out of seeing him work. Not that she got a whole lot of time. In the diner, there was never any spare time to linger too long.

Beatrice waved for her to head into the back. Carl was at his large chopping board, working on something. The scent of turkey was heavy in the air. She'd watched him brine at least six of the massive birds.

"Morning, Carl," she said.

"Morning, sweetheart. How was your run today?"

"Canceled. Jase is spending it with family."

"Do we know a lot about this Jase person?" he asked.

She smiled. "Probably not as much as you'd like to know."

"Right, I need you to try this." He had two waffles on a plate with syrup.

"I don't think I can."

"You promised me you weren't on a diet."

"It's not a diet, just a lifestyle change," she said.

"I don't get it. You're perfect the way you are." He tutted to himself. "It's the holidays. I'll go running with you if you need it."

She chuckled and took the plate from him. She didn't get the chance to have breakfast. Her alarm didn't go off, and she woke up way too close to the time she needed to work.

The waffles were so soft, she didn't even need to use a knife to cut them. The fork slid through them, and they were properly cooked. With the spiced syrup, they looked so good, and she took a bite. She closed her eyes,

as it was just the right amount of sweetness, and the subtle spice made her mouth water.

“Oh, wow, these are so good,” she said.

“Well worth a run for?”

She laughed. “Yes.”

Carl wrapped his arm around her shoulder and she tensed up, not ready for such contact. He seemed to know what he’d done because he quickly backed off.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

“Not, it’s fine. You were just giving me a hug.” Maddie finished the waffles and put the plate into the sink just as Grant came in.

“What did I miss?” he asked.

She rolled her eyes. “The best waffles in the world. If you’ll excuse me.”

“Maddie, I’m sorry if that crossed a line,” Carl said.

“Carl, don’t worry about it.”

“What did I miss?”

Maddie shook her head and left the room. The dining room was filling up. Soft music played, and she got into the swing of things, asking what people wanted.

Beatrice pulled her to one side and told her they had a booked breakfast crowd, and it extended through to dinner.

“Are you sure you’re okay with being here?” Beatrice asked.

“Yep. I have nowhere else I have to be. I am all yours today,” she said.

“We’re closed tomorrow,” Beatrice said.

“Oh, you are?”

“Yeah. We like to do the Thanksgiving, and take Friday off.”

“Right, of course.” Maddie forced a smile she didn’t feel one bit. Work had become one of the best distractions and to not have it, well, she didn’t even want to think about it.

Memories of Bull were the worst as they were attached to hopes. Hopes that were no longer relevant to her.

“Are you okay?” Beatrice asked.

“I am fine. More than fine.”

The lies fell hard from her lips. She wasn't okay. Not even a little bit. Most Thanksgivings were spent on her own. There was nothing bad about it. Only this time, she would be alone with her thoughts.

She hated Bull at that moment.

Why couldn't he have left her alone?

Why did he have to make her feel like he cared, when they both knew the truth? He never cared about her.

She pressed a hand to her stomach, feeling the sickness rising within her, threatening to spill over.

"Are you okay?" Beatrice asked.

"I'm fine. Perfectly fine." She nodded, and it was the last thing she felt. The constant mantra went off inside her head, as if she could somehow make it real, that she could make herself fine.

It wasn't real. She wasn't fine.

It would never be real, and she hated it.

Taking a deep breath, she turned back to the customers and started to work. With each minute that passed, she finally gained her composure.

She could do this.

The breakfast customers lingered, and they all got to talking. Maddie refilled their coffees when they asked, or sent Carl an order of his special pumpkin concoction, which was really good. She'd had a cup herself.

Grant came to stand with her. "This is kind of cool," he said.

Was it harder for her because of Grant? He was a reminder of Bull.

"It is."

"Have you ever been here before for Thanksgiving?" he asked.

"No. I tended to stay home at my place." The place Bull had gotten rid of because she had moved in with him. "Excuse me."

She got up and made her way toward the back, going through the staff room, toward the private bathroom.

Beatrice had said with the number of people passing through, the least she could do was offer a private toilet to her staff.

Entering the small bathroom, she gripped the edge of the counter, closing her eyes and taking several deep breaths.

"It's fine. I'm fine. Everything is fine." She kept on saying those words in the hope of them being right.

In and out.

She took long deep breaths.

“Maddie?”

She opened her eyes and gasped as she caught sight of Bull in the mirror.

He spun her around, sank his fingers into her hair, tilted her head back, and kissed her.

His body was so much bigger than hers. She gasped as his tongue traced across her bottom lip. A moan escaped her.

Her traitorous body betrayed her as she responded to him. This was the last thing she wanted to do. There wasn't a single part of her that wanted to give in to him, and yet, her body had other ideas.

She was aroused.

For a split second, she allowed herself to wrap her arms around his neck, to give in to the temptation. To kiss him. To feel him against her. The warmth of his touch set her aflame with even more need, and then reality came to her.

“Look, some guy is going to want ... that. It's not me. I'm sorry. I've found out what I really want. No guy wants a fat chick, ever.”

His words echoed throughout her head, and she pulled back. Where she was once gripping him for more, this time, she shoved her hands at his chest.

“Get the hell away from me.”

“Maddie?”

“No, you don't get to Maddie me. You stay the hell away from me.”

She left the bathroom and made her way out to the main diner. Her hands shook as her lips tingled.

This was cruel. She hated him.

“Are you okay?” Grant asked.

“I don't know what game you're playing, but I want no part in it. Not a single one.”

“I have no idea what you're talking about.”

She looked into his eyes, trying to figure him out, but he must have been one hell of a liar because she couldn't make out a tell, or know if he was lying or not.

“It doesn't matter.” She wrapped her arms around herself and went to the kitchen where Carl was doing some last-minute finishing touches.

“Hey, sweetheart,” he said.

She forced a smile to her lips.

Carl and Beatrice always had the power to make her smile, even when she was struggling with everything else.

She didn’t know what game Bull was playing, but she didn’t want it to be anywhere near her.

“Do you want to talk about whatever is bothering you?” Carl asked.

“It’s fine. I’m fine.”

“You know you don’t have to keep on saying that. I’m a big boy, I can take it.”

Tears filled her eyes, but this was a holiday to be thankful for. She had no intention of ruining it with tears.

“I would tell you if I needed to.” She smiled at him. “So, where can I help?”

Bull looked down at Maddie’s bed, and an ache in his gut started that refused to go down. This was where Maddie slept.

His woman.

All on her own.

She didn’t deserve to be here. She should be by his side.

The sound of the door opening and closing had him glancing behind him.

“Bull, damn it,” Grant said.

He left Maddie’s room, wanting to take one of her pillows with him, but he figured that would make her suspicious.

“What the hell were you doing in the diner?” Grant asked when he met him in the sitting room.

“I had to see her.”

“Yeah, and you scared the fuck out of her.” Grant folded his arms. “I’m supposed to be on her side, and she was the one who came at me, knowing that I was the one who led you there.”

“I had to see her. You know I did.” He was going out of his mind not being near her. Each day he was away from her was another day driving him crazy.

“We have a plan, Bull.”

“How is she?”

Grant groaned. "Do you want to know the answer to that?"

"Yes."

"I don't think you do."

"Just give it to me straight."

"I've only been here for two nights, and ... she calls for you at night," he said.

"What?"

"If you watch the footage, because I know you've got this place bugged or watched, or whatnot, listen to her at night. She spends a good hour before she falls asleep exhausted, crying. Then, she ... and she doesn't know this, she calls for you. It's so fucking sad."

Bull gritted his teeth, hands clenched into fists.

"Don't fuck anything up. Maddie doesn't even know you're here. If she did, I imagine she'd have my fucking guts."

"What do we know about the gym owner?" he asked. He had to stay focused. All he wanted to do was take her in his arms.

"He seems on the up and up. Knows his shit. He's helping Maddie to lose weight."

"I want you to put an end to that shit," Bull said. Maddie was perfect the way she was. He didn't want her to change.

"Brother, you ended things calling her fat. Maddie has been bullied for her weight for a long time. She's not going to stop."

"Fuck!"

He wanted to kick something or at least throw it.

"Bull, don't damage anything."

"You're not giving me good news here, Grant."

"I'm with them when they run. I've paid to go to the gym, and I'll be there on the three nights Maddie is, okay? I am doing everything I can. It's hard to befriend someone who ... in all honesty has a right to hate my guts."

"Maddie isn't like that."

"I know. I was shocked the dumpster ruse paid off. She couldn't stand for me to be out in the cold."

Bull ran a hand down his face.

"Are we any closer?" Grant asked.

“Pat has intel from one of the groups tracking him. It would seem Julio has pissed off a few people, and they want him dead. He got a call yesterday. A couple of men were spotted here in Carnage.”

“Shit,” Grant said.

“I want you to keep a close eye on Maddie. Don’t let her leave your sight. I don’t want her to come to harm because of this.”

“I’m on it. I am going to need my keys though.”

Grant had sent him a text as to where he kept them so they could have this meeting. His brother insisted on keeping in contact with him while they did this.

The club hadn’t argued with his expulsion of Grant based on the made-up charges. Everyone had voted that he had to go and stay gone.

Some of the club women were in mourning for his dick, but they’d get over it.

He handed Grant the keys and shook his hands. “You stay safe as well.”

“I always do.”

Leaving the apartment, he took a couple of steps and paused as Maddie came toward him. When she saw him, she stopped as well. She was at the bottom of the steps, and Bull continued down toward her.

He couldn’t look away.

Her face looked thinner, and the clothes she wore pretty much hung off her frame, and he fucking hated them.

She needed to stop losing weight.

What do you expect, asshole? You hit her where it hurt.

He’d known her weight was a sensitive issue for her, and he’d exploited that.

There was nothing for him to say. He was a grade-A asshole. No, worse than that. He just couldn’t think of the right words.

“Maddie, I—”

She held her hands up. “I don’t need an explanation for why you’re coming to visit your brother. I don’t need anything from you.”

He gritted his teeth.

It would be so easy to take her into his arms, to drag her back to his home, to show her that he was a fucking liar and he loved her more than anything, but instead, he took a step back.

For her own safety. It grieved him to do this. But do it, he must. He would protect her at all costs.

Walking back toward the main diner, he entered the back kitchen. Beatrice and Carl were embracing. When they caught sight of him, they immediately broke apart, and Carl glanced at his knives.

"I wouldn't recommend it," Bull said.

"Get the hell out," Carl said.

"No." He reached into his jacket pocket and put the envelope of money on the table.

"What is this?" Beatrice asked.

"For my brother and Maddie."

Beatrice picked up the envelope and threw it at him. "We don't need your guilt money."

Bull looked at the two. "You two should remember who you're dealing with." He picked the envelope up. "Not all is what it seems. This is for Grant and Maddie. I suggest if you want to still be breathing come the festive season, you take the money, and you have this opportunity with your daughter."

With that, he turned on his heel and left.

His bike was parked a few blocks down, near the first housing estate.

It was so fucking cold. His balls were like blocks of ice. He had to go and see Maddie, to touch her.

As he got to his bike, he wasn't surprised to see Pat parked close to him. "Don't you have family to go and see?" he asked.

"Nope, but I find it fascinating when my Prez goes to see his little brother. The one that got kicked out by himself. Did you have to kick him in the balls or was that just for fun?" Pat asked.

"It was for fun. You knew?"

"Grant is a lot of things, but going to the cartel is the last thing he'd do. He's an asshole, a womanizer, a piece of work, and he's fucking loyal to you, even if he is a hothead."

"Why didn't you call me out at the club meeting?" Bull asked.

"I know you, Prez. You've got a game plan in the works. and I'm not the kind of man to screw it up just to make you look bad."

Bull nodded.

"What is the game plan?" Pat asked.

"I'd rather not. Do you have any location on two of the Vito Crew?" He was tired of this. It hadn't even been a month, but he wanted his woman back.

Julio was taking too long to make his move.

William had called him that morning. The guy was pissed. They had sent him another part of Craig that morning, the guy's dick. Even Bull knew that was fucking wrong. Julio was trying to goad William, but why?

"It's time for us to go see Dylan," Bull said.

He hated to bring the sheriff into any of his problems, or for them to even share details. The less they knew about each other's lives, the better. He hated to admit, even to himself, that he was getting desperate when it came to Maddie's safety, and his own personal need to have her back in his life was strong.

"This will be a personal call. I don't think he'd appreciate us appearing on our bikes."

"Do I look like I give a fuck?" Bull asked.

"Normally, you're a little more considerate."

Normally, he was a very happy man, but that ship had sailed with the fucking dog ring, the cartel, William Ranford, and every other motherfucker who was meddling with his life. They were keeping him apart from Maddie.

He was breaking all of his own rules.

Straddling his bike, he turned over the ignition, and he didn't give himself the gratification of the purr of his machine. He was on a mission to get the woman of his dreams back to him. He rode straight to Dylan's place.

It was Thanksgiving, but the place was already made up for Christmas. Dylan was the family man.

Parking his bike outside, he had only just stepped on the man's land when the door opened.

Dylan shut his door behind him, and he looked less than pleased to see him.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Dylan asked.

"We had to stop by. We've got some business to deal with," Bull said.

"Believe me, it's for the sake of the town more than anything."

Dylan loved Carnage, as did Bull. They both had an understanding in keeping it safe. Dylan knew when to look the other way, just as Bull knew

when to step the fuck back.

Today, he wasn't doing that.

"Come by my office Saturday."

"Not happening," Bull said.

"Damn it, Bull. My family—"

"Can wait. This cannot. Do you think I'd be here if I had any other option?"

Dylan ran his fingers through his hair and nodded. "Fine. I'll be back in a moment."

Bull waited on the man's front lawn, knowing his presence would speed shit along.

Pat was too busy laughing back on his bike. It was a nice neighborhood Dylan lived in.

Glancing at the house, he caught sight of a couple of kids looking down at him from the windows upstairs. He ignored them.

Dylan walked out of the house, complete with his sheriff jacket, looking mightily pissed off.

No words were needed as Bull went back to his bike, straddling his machine, turning over the engine, and following behind Dylan.

They arrived at the station in ten minutes, and Bull parked his bike then walked into the main building close behind Dylan. The old bat known as Grace was on the main reception. A cigarette dangled from her lips.

Dylan tutted. "I've told you not to smoke, Grace."

"I wiped your shit-covered ass when you were a boy, Dylan. Don't tell me what to do. I'm too old to follow orders."

Bull snorted. "Hey, Grace."

"The reprobates are here. Are you two finally getting thrown into a cell?"

He winked at her, and Grace sneered even more.

Dylan shook his head. "I don't know why the fuck I keep her around. She does nothing but cause trouble."

They entered Dylan's office, and he shut the door. Pat pulled out a device and Bull smirked.

"Keep that on you at all times?" Bull asked.

"You never know who is listening." He checked for any bugs or anything that would allow someone to hear their conversation. "We're

clear.”

“Shit, Bull, what mess have you gotten into?”

“Cartel.”

Dylan tensed up.

“Before you start, this isn’t my business. This has to do with my dad. The Vito Crew, you heard of them?”

“Yeah, I heard of them. They used to come through town when your dad was in charge. My old man tried to get a handle on the situation when he was sheriff and found himself in a grave.”

It was one of the reasons he and Dylan had an understanding. Bull had gone to Dylan with his problem, and between them, they made his arrangement that allowed them to exist in the same town peacefully.

So far, nothing had caused him shit—until now.

Bull was vague with the details. Ranford’s name had Dylan reaching for the map. “Heard of Ranford’s activity. Rumors are rife about his ability to keep the cartel back, which works in our favor.” Dylan grabbed a pen and traced a path through Ranford’s turf, which led the cartel straight to Carnage. “This is a great distribution site. We’re far enough away from any crap. My dad talked about this all the time. Bored my mom half to death with his constant rantings about how easy it would be for drug lords and whatnot to take position in Carnage. It’s a prime spot.”

He looked at the map and couldn’t deny it. This was exactly what the cartel wanted.

“I need you to run background checks of every single person who has come to town. Take extra care when it comes to the guy who owns the gym.”

“Jase?” Dylan asked. “You think he’s part of it?”

“I think it’s a little convenient how he’s new in town and has taken a special interest in Maddie.”

“Your ex.”

Bull gritted his teeth. “Just do it.”

Chapter Nineteen

“It’s festive,” Maddie said, looking at the tree in the corner.

“It’s small as fuck and you know it,” Grant said.

She glared at him. “When are you going to find a new place to live in?”

“Why? You’re not enjoying my company?” he asked, sitting down on the sofa. Every night they made it up together for him to sleep on, and every morning, he wrapped it all up.

“I just ... aren’t you like ... I don’t know ... wanting female company?”

“You’re asking me if I want to go out and fuck?”

“You don’t have to be crude,” she said, picking up the boxes and carrying them toward the door. It was way too cold, and she would take them out to the recycling in a moment.

She walked into the kitchen and put the kettle on.

Coffee with cream and sugar was off the menu, but Jase had given her these herbal tea bags. She picked one out and sniffed it. It looked odd.

“What are you doing?” Grant asked. “We’re supposed to be having a movie marathon.” December first, and she was spending it with the guy who had bullied her, her ex’s brother. Where had her life gone wrong?

“I’m making myself some tea.” She held up the tea bag. “Want one?”

“Hell no,” he said. “What is that?”

“Herbal tea,” Maddie said. “Jase gave it to me. It is supposed to be healthier than coffee.” She wrinkled her nose.

“You know, just because it is supposed to be healthier doesn’t mean it is.”

She shrugged. “I’ll trust my personal trainer, thank you very much.”

She put the tea bag into the water and poured hot water over it.

“Why?” he asked.

“Why what?”

“Why are you trusting that asshole?”

She sighed. “Because he knows what he’s talking about, and he hasn’t lied to me.” She shrugged. “I’m sure you’re not used to men telling you the truth.”

Grant put a hand to his chest and groaned. “Ouch, that one hurt.”

She snorted. "Oh, please, I doubt anything hurts you."

Putting the spoon into her cup, she stirred the teabag.

"It looks like piss," Grant said.

"It does not."

"I'll have a coffee."

She was about to tell him to make it him damn self but decided against it. After grabbing a cup from the cupboard, she started to make him a coffee. He liked his sweet with no cream or milk.

After handing him the cup, she picked up her own and walked into the sitting room. With it being her first day off from exercising and work, she'd opted for a pair of pajama bottoms with little Christmas trees on as well as a shirt that said *Merry Christmas* on it. With Grant present, she'd also opted for a bra. If he hadn't been around, she would've been without a bra, no question.

Sniffing her herbal tea, she couldn't deny the smell was kind of gross. She'd never drunk tea with that slightly bitter taste. It wasn't good.

Jase had told her to give it a try, and seeing as she trusted him, that was exactly what she did.

"You're struggling to drink that," Grant said, putting his mug on the coaster.

"Put the movie on. We don't have to talk about your predilections to a hot beverage."

Grant grabbed the DVD. She couldn't remember what film they had decided on first, but he put the movie into the player and grabbed the remotes.

She continued to sip at her tea and with each taste, she tried not to shudder. It was next to impossible.

The taste was gross.

It's good for me.

So good.

"Why are you doing all this?" Grant asked.

"Doing all what?"

"With Jase. With the gym. You never did that through high school."

"Please don't bring up high school."

"Look, I'm sorry I was a fucking asshole to you back then. If I could go back and change it, I would."

“Oh, please, give me a break. You wouldn’t change it and you want to know how I know?” she asked.

“How?”

“When I came to work at the garage. The way you talked to me gave it all away. You think I’m fat and ugly, and a waste of time, right?”

“I wouldn’t say those words exactly.”

She laughed. “Is that because you’re afraid of being homeless?”

“Not at all.”

“In case you didn’t know, it’s not fun being stood up. It’s not fun being humiliated with some of the town to look on.” She pressed her lips together, trying not to think about Bull. Closing her eyes, she shook her head.

“Maddie, my brother is going through some stuff.”

“Don’t, okay? I get it, and I don’t need your pity. I’m doing this for me. I’m doing this because I’m tired of being judged for my size.” She nibbled on her lip. “I’m sorry, I just don’t want to talk about this with you.”

“I get it.” He held his hands up. “I’m a dick. You should know that.”

“I know you’re a dick. Can we just watch the movie?” she asked.

“Sure. Sure.”

The tea wasn’t going to happen. She tried to drink it, but it was so bad. There was no way it was supposed to be edible.

Halfway through the first movie, she was too busy thinking about Grant’s question. Maddie watched the movie, but she didn’t take in any of the story.

Being stood up, the name-calling, even her parents telling her she’d never get a man, and Bull’s final insult had been the last straw.

She wanted to be happy with herself. Looking in the mirror every day and saying she was beautiful and sexy didn’t work.

Tears filled her eyes, and she found it a welcome relief when her cell phone went off.

Swiping at the tears, she grabbed her cell phone and saw it was Hellen calling at the animal shelter. Instantly, she felt like such a bad friend for leaving her for so long.

With everything that had happened with Bull, she’d been focusing on just existing. On trying to be too exhausted to think.

"I've got to take this." She walked toward the living room, giving Grant plenty of space so he could still hear the movie. "Hi, Hellen," she said.

"Maddie, I'm so glad you picked up. I hope this is not a bad time."

"It's fine. What's up?"

"Most of the volunteers are off sick. I need some help to walk the dogs," she said.

"No need to worry. I'll be right there."

"You're sure?"

"Of course. You know I love to help out where I can." She wanted to hang out with the dogs today.

"I'll be waiting for you. I know they'll be excited to see you."

She hung up as Grant pressed pause on the television, turning around in his seat to look at her. "What's going on? Where are we going?"

"You're staying here. I'm going to head to the animal shelter." She disappeared into her bedroom, changing out of her pajamas into a pair of jeans and a shirt that had both seen better days.

Tying her hair up on top of her head, she left her room to see Grant already at the door.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm coming with you."

"Hell no. No, not happening. Not at all. You are not coming with me."

"And why not?"

"Because I've said so and I don't want you there."

"Maddie, what has gotten into you?"

She took a deep breath. "I don't know what's going on with you, Grant, but this with us being friends isn't exactly happening. We're never going to be friends. I felt sorry for you, and I cannot find a good enough reason to kick you out of my house. You made my life a misery growing up, and your brother tore my heart out. So please, when I need space, kindly give it to me."

Grant opened his mouth and closed it.

"I don't think it's a good idea you going out on your own. I will keep my distance and I'll even shut up. I know what happened the last time you were at the animal shelter, Maddie, and I don't want to see that happen again."

She wanted to argue with him, but the truth was, she didn't have a good enough reason.

"Fine." She hated giving in, but it was the only thing to do. He wouldn't leave her alone otherwise. "But you will be walking the dogs as well. If you're determined to go where I go, you don't get to be lazy."

Maddie grabbed her jacket, shoving her hands that were already cold inside. She sped down the steps and walked several feet when Grant called back to her.

"Wouldn't this be quicker?" he asked.

"I thought you didn't have a bike."

"I've been kicked out of the club, but that doesn't mean I don't get to ride my beauty. My patch is gone, not my property."

"Oh," she said.

The bike looked like a death trap.

"Climb on, I'll get us there faster."

Grant climbed onto his death machine, and Maddie did the same, feeling her nerves getting the better of her as she didn't know what to hold on to.

"You're going to have to hold on to me," he said. He took her arms and wrapped them around his body.

Maddie loosened her hold immediately.

"You don't want to fall off, do you?"

"Of course not."

"Then hold on to me." He gave her hands a little pat.

She hated it.

The sound of the bike. The feel of the bike.

She was going to die. There was no doubting it.

Sickness coiled in her stomach.

"Are you okay?" Grant asked.

"Yes, I'm fine. Are we there yet?" she asked.

"Not even close, babe. We haven't moved."

She opened her eyes and saw they were still in the same position.

"Oh."

He chuckled.

"Don't call me babe."

"Sweetheart."

“No, you just get to call me Maddie. Nothing else.”

“Okey-doke,” he said.

This time, she squeezed her eyes shut after he started to move. There was a point as he rode to the animal shelter that she thought she heard him ask her to let go. She couldn’t.

She was so scared of falling off.

They got to the animal shelter in one piece, and Maddie was more than happy to climb off.

“Are you okay?” Grant asked.

“Yep. I’m fine. Totally fine.”

She looked toward the animal shelter, grateful for the distraction. The sounds of barking dogs were overpowering.

Entering the shelter, she spotted Hellen, who looked a little too frazzled. The moment Hellen saw her, she came running around from the counter and pulled her in for an embrace. “I’ve never been so happy to see someone in my whole life.”

She laughed. “I brought reinforcements.”

Hellen glanced at Grant, who held his hand up in acknowledgment.

“We’re too swamped to be picky.”

“Tell me what you want.”

All of the dogs needed to be walked. Some of the kennels needed to be cleaned. Food needed to be handed out.

The volunteers had some kind of sickness bug mixed with the flu. Maddie didn’t know if there were a few lies going around, or if you could have a sickness bug and the flu together. Either way, she was just happy to be of use.

Bull sat at the empty reception desk, thinking about Maddie. The room looked filthy. Every morning and evening, she’d give the place a quick clean so customers were happy to stay. Without her, the place looked like shit.

There were no decorations up. No festive shit. The Halloween tinsel sat on the floor in dirt and dust.

At forty-two years old, Bull finally knew what it was like to have and lose something he wanted more than anything else. It wasn’t like he didn’t treasure Maddie. He did. He fucking loved her. She was his life. His whole

world, and once again, club business got in the way. He had to do whatever he could to protect her.

Bull stayed in the chair with his feet up on top of the counter even as he heard the sound of a car entering his garage.

It was a slow day.

He'd pissed off a load of customers, and people were giving him the space he needed, including his club.

The reception door opened, and he didn't look to see who it was.

"Slow day?" Dylan asked. The sheriff was the last person he wanted to see.

"Fucking slow day," he said. Lifting his head, he looked at Dylan. "What do you have for me?"

"Not a whole lot. Your boy at the gym, he's clean."

Putting his legs to the floor, Bull stood up. "No, that isn't possible."

"I'm afraid it is. There's nothing on him. He's a professional personal trainer. Has been for the past fifteen years. He's well regarded and people travel miles to find him."

"Why the fuck is he in Carnage?" he asked.

If someone was so damn good at what he did, why wasn't he in the city?

Dylan pulled a file out of his jacket pocket. "He was a victim of a mad stalker a couple of years ago. The woman became obsessed with him. She began to hurt his clients. Men and women. In the end, she tried to kill him. He quit, packed up, and ended up taking a long vacation until he came here."

Bull glanced through the file. The woman who was the stalker looked pretty. She had the weird eyes though. The mad stalker eyes.

"Okay."

"He's not your guy."

"Anyone else in town?" Bull asked.

"I've checked the motels, the bed-and-breakfasts. Nothing. No one is staying in this town, or if they are, they are lying low."

"What about any recent home purchases?" he asked.

"None. The last piece of land to be sold was the old field, and that's coming up as a private contract."

Bull slammed the file closed and handed it to Dylan.

“How bad are we looking for this to blowback on the people?”

“I don’t know,” Bull said. “They’re being smart, which is new.”

“I hate to say this, but when my old man was in charge, he would say that people didn’t need to be living for them to be moved in.”

“What do you mean?”

“The Vito Crew are mean sons of bitches, right?”

“Yeah.”

“What’s to say they haven’t killed someone and decided to move in?”
Dylan sighed.

“That would require house calls,” Bull said.

They needed to do this on the down low.

“There’s a property about ten miles back. An old rundown ranch. No one has been in it for years. The place is practically condemned. Have you checked that out?”

“No,” Bull said, getting to his feet. “Do you want to take a little trip?”

“Only if you agree to do this my way,” Dylan said.

“Not a fucking chance. Let’s go.” Bull moved toward his bike and straddled his machine.

“Don’t you want to drive with me?” Dylan asked.

“I’d rather suck my own dick than ride in that thing.” He pulled out of his garage parking lot and took to the roads that led to the old rundown ranch. He knew the place. Even as a kid, the place had been a crumbling mess of ruin.

He’d been playing there when he was a teenager when one of the walls had fallen down. A couple of kids had gotten hurt, which was why the place had been locked up tight. This was just one of the barns.

Some kids used to break into the house at night, make out, have sex, smoke pot, do some drugs. It was a death trap of the highest order.

Bull slowed his bike down as he pulled up to the main gate and saw the bolts were on the floor, and the gate partially open.

Dylan was a few minutes behind him.

“It could be kids,” Dylan said.

“Yeah, I don’t think kids would leave the gate looking shut for any onlooker.” There was too much overgrown brush for him to see clearly.
“Fuck.”

Dylan pulled his gun out of his back pocket.

Bull rolled his eyes.

"Don't give me that shit. We both know you're packing," Dylan said.

Pulling his own gun out, he made sure it was loaded and ready. Together, they entered the gate. Bull didn't wait for instructions because he was tired of always fucking waiting.

Dylan wasn't too far behind him as they sped toward the house. When they were close, he slowed down to a stop, the good sheriff out of breath.

"You good?" Bull asked.

"Super." The pants came in hard.

He glanced around the tree, and sure enough, he saw the evidence of a car.

"Someone's here," he said.

"You sure?"

"The car is in pristine condition." He moved from his position and got close to the ranch.

It looked worse than the last time he saw it. One of the walls beneath the window had fallen down. The place was a mess, and that was putting it mildly.

"I'm going to check the back," Bull said.

He didn't wait for Dylan to answer. He wasn't here for the cop.

Rounding the house, he came to a stop at the sound of voices and dogs.

"We need more dogs. They're piling up, man."

Bull stayed still and slowly looked around the side of the building. Two men stood facing each other. One was small, the other particularly large. He didn't recognize either man.

"Julio wants this shit dealt with."

"Look, we can't get to the girl. She's useless. We told you that. There's no good way to get to Bull."

"Julio needs to come up with another plan."

This was all kinds of interesting, but for Bull, he'd heard enough.

"Well, why doesn't Julio come and talk to me?" Bull asked, making his presence known.

The two men drew their weapons, but he fired, sending one man crashing to the floor and grabbing his leg, and with the other, the perfect shot right through the hands.

Dylan came around the corner, red-faced and pissed off. "Bull, this isn't your operation."

"Actually, Sheriff, do you remember our little agreement?" Bull asked. "The one where we agreed not to get into each other's business so we could have a long and happy life together?"

"Yes," Dylan said through gritted teeth.

"I'd like you to meet cartel member number one, and cartel member number two. That makes this club business. I suggest, for your own sake, you head back to the car and forget about what you saw today. I will come to you to get the dogs."

Dylan looked like he wanted to argue.

"They were talking about hurting Maddie," Bull said.

The sheriff put his gun away. "Fine, but ... damn it, Bull."

"I've got this, Sheriff. Don't worry about me."

"You're making a big mistake," Cartel Member Number One said.

Bull tutted. "I'm making a big mistake. I've been the Vito Crew Cartel's errand boy for the last time. You're going to tell me exactly what I need to know."

"We talk to you, we're already dead. Julio will see to it." This came from Cartel Member Number Two.

"Yes, yes, I keep hearing how big and bad Julio is. I've never met him, but seeing as you two are here, I think I can get my answers out of you."

The first cartel member laughed.

Bull was rather amused. Bleeding from a gunshot wound, and he was laughing. The guy had balls.

"We will never talk. You will never get anything out of us."

Bull looked between one and two, then two and one. Both of them looked pretty sure about that.

"Okay, fine. I was hoping you'd guys would pick the hard way, and I'm guessing it is my lucky day."

Some of the dogs had simmered down a little bit.

He spotted two chairs that had seen better days. Within minutes, he had both men in chairs and went hunting for some make-do torturing tools. When the guy with the bleeding hands tried to escape, he shot him in the leg, stopping him from going anywhere.

Once Bull had rope and the necessary house tools that could easily be used for implements of torture, he returned. He'd also put a call through to the club. They were on their way.

It was time to gather the information he needed, to kill Julio and the Vito Crew, and to take back his woman.

Bull was bored with waiting. He was tired of being a man's whipping boy. Staring between each man, wondering where to start, he grabbed his cell phone and called William.

"What?" William asked when he picked up.

"Now is that any way to talk to the man who is going to help you get revenge on your brother?"

"The only way I'm going to get revenge for my brother is if you have Julio."

"I don't quite have Julio, but it won't be long now. I've got two of his minions. They set up another dogfighting ring. Do these things make that much money?"

"They're a start," William said.

"Yeah, well, I'm shutting that shit down." He loved dogs. Always had.

"Give me your location," William said.

Bull gave it, and the next call he did was to Grant, giving him an update, and telling him not to let Maddie anywhere near them. To keep her at the animal shelter for as long as possible.

He wasn't going to stop until he had all the answers.

"I'm so very sorry about all of that," he said. "I do hate to keep the pain waiting." He looked through the rusty tool kit and found what he was looking for. A nice big pair of pliers.

Holding them up, he looked between the two men, trying to figure out who he should hurt first. "One or two. Two or one."

Both men looked nervous.

He wondered which one would talk. In his experience of torture, especially with two people, make one of them feel the pain, advance to the other who'd witnessed it all, and tada, you have your blabber.

He decided to go for the biggest of the two, the more muscular. If he suffered the pain, the weaker of the two always caved. This was just the way things worked.

Smiling at the asshole, he brought out his knife and slammed it through the guy's palm. The screaming started, and Bull wasn't done. He wanted answers and these men were going to give them to him.

By the time his club and William arrived, the smaller guy was starting to blab, giving up Julio's location.

It was his lucky day because Julio had a plan to grab Maddie. It would seem his little trip on Thanksgiving didn't go without notice.

The two men ended up with a bullet in their heads.

As he tried to call Grant, no one answered. Panic filled Bull. Nothing could happen to his woman or his brother.

He had to go save them.

Chapter Twenty

“You are a pretty thing, I’ll give Bull that. The pictures of you never did you justice,” the man with the scars down his face said as he ran a blade across her cheek.

Fear had already come, and the feeling wouldn’t stop.

She couldn’t even pretend to put a brave face on because she was so scared. Grant was passed out in the corner after being hit over the head with a crowbar. They’d been out walking the dogs when this large black van had come to a stop.

Grant had fought hard, but one hit with that thing, and he’d gone down as if he was nothing.

Tears filled her eyes as the point of the blade was pressed against her cheek.

“Yes, that’s it, cry for me. I have to say, Bull is a surprise to me. He’s usually a man who doesn’t have any weakness, but when it comes to you, you’re his weakness.”

She turned to him and shook her head. “I’m not his anything. Bull will not come for anyone but his brother.”

“Ah, that’s where you’re mistaken. I’ve seen the way he is with you.”

“You’re wrong.”

“Oh, I’m wrong? So I’m wrong about Bull visiting you on Thanksgiving?”

Maddie thought about the kiss and denied it. “You have no idea what you’re talking about.”

He brought the back of his hand across her face. “You be careful how you speak to me.”

Pain rushed through her head as Grant’s cell phone went off in the background. She groaned, feeling a little sick from the pain.

Julio tutted. The men had called him by that name.

She wanted to know if Grant was okay.

Julio moved toward Grant.

“Leave him alone,” she said.

He began to pat down his body, and Maddie attempted to wriggle out of the ropes that bound her.

Grant didn't deserve to be hurt. He was an asshole and part of her still hated him, but he'd tried to protect her. He was the one who had told her to run. One of Julio's men had captured her and dragged her back to the van by her hair.

She'd screamed at the pain, but it hadn't stopped her captor. He'd been the one to throw her into the van, tie her up, and now she was at the mercy of Julio. It didn't take a genius to work out that Julio wasn't friends with Bull.

Julio slammed his boot into Grant's back just before he moved away.

Maddie yelled for him to stop.

"Ah, look at this, it's the besotted brother now." Julio pressed the cell phone's button. Bull's voice filled the room.

"Grant, are you there? I need you to get Maddie the hell away from the shelter. Unleash the fucking dogs if you have to."

"Aw, this sounds like such true love," Julio said.

Silent static filled the air.

"Julio."

"That son of a bitch is there. I'm going to fucking kill him."

Maddie didn't recognize that voice.

Julio did. "Ah, Mr. William Ranford. Enjoying the little drug investigation going down in your area? It didn't take much for the cops to pick up your scent."

"I'm going to fucking kill you."

"Oh, enough. We both know that isn't possible right now. I've got two little treasures in my possession." Julio advanced toward her. "One of them is unconscious, but I've got another right here."

She screamed as he grabbed a fist full of her hair, tugging it back.

"Maddie, why don't you say hello."

He pulled even harder on her hair to the point she knew some was going to be yanked out if he didn't stop.

"Hello," she said.

"Maddie, fuck! If you fucking touch her, I'm going—"

It was the wrong thing for Bull to say because Julio let go of her hair, brought back his knife, and slashed her across the face.

She screamed. With no way to defend herself, she was at this crazy man's mercy.

“That is your first strike, Bull. The next one might be her throat. Tell them what I just did, Maddie.”

She swallowed around the lump in her throat. The blood from her cheek seeped down her neck to her shirt. “He slashed my cheek.”

“Fuck, Maddie, I am so sorry.”

“Yeah, you’re always so sorry, aren’t you, Bull?” Julio crouched down before her, smiling. “But why don’t you tell Maddie how you really feel? She seems to be under the impression you don’t want her.”

Silence.

“How about this? For every second you don’t talk, I imbed the knife into a part of her body,” Julio said.

He pressed the tip of the blade toward her knee, and she couldn’t stop the scream from filling the air.

Panic rose.

He tutted. “So easy to hurt.”

“Please, stop!” She yelled the words, hoping he’d listen.

“There’s only one way for this to stop.”

He pressed even deeper. The bastard was enjoying it as he went slowly, hurting her on purpose. He was actually getting a kick out of it.

She couldn’t contain her pain.

“I’m in love with her,” Bull said.

Maddie jerked her head up as Julio immediately stopped hurting her.

“That’s right, you do love her, don’t you?”

She couldn’t believe it.

“Yes.”

No. There was no way this was real. Bull didn’t love her. He had said he didn’t. He never loved her.

“Tell me more, Bull,” Julio said, laughing.

“I ... spending any time away from her is the worst feeling in the world. I’ve been in love with Maddie for a very long time, but she has always avoided me. When I saw my chance, I took it.”

“I don’t think she quite believes you, Bull,” Julio said.

“I never stopped loving you. I always loved you, Maddie. I only said the shit I said so you wouldn’t argue with me. So you’d accept the lie. I knew your weight upset you, but I don’t believe it. I hate seeing you lose those curves. I want them back.”

“How am I supposed to believe you?” Maddie asked.

Julio tutted. “This is a loving reunion.”

“You’re right,” Bull said.

The door to the warehouse slammed open, and there, in the flesh, was Bull, with a man she assumed was William Ranford, and most of the Chaos and Carnage MC at their back. “It’s an annihilation of the Vito Crew.

Out of nowhere, Grant was there with a crowbar, taking down the guy who had a gun pointed at her.

Maddie didn’t know what happened next as all hell broke loose.

Gunshots were fired, and Grant pushed her to the floor. She squeezed her eyes shut, terrified. She knew she should be focusing on not getting shot, but all she could think about was Bull. About the words he’d said.

Was it possible?

She wasn’t sure.

He’d been telling her the truth.

Amongst the chaos, silence finally reigned, and with all the commotion, Grant had helped to remove the ropes that bound her to the chair.

In the distance, she heard the sound of police sirens, and Bull released a curse.

His arms around her didn’t offer immediate comfort. She wasn’t sure how she felt being this close to him.

Bull helped her to her feet and stared into her eyes. His gaze went to her cheek, and it was a little struggle to stand with the pain in her knee from where Julio had started to stab her.

“I’ve got you, Maddie,” he said.

They were heading outside the warehouse, and she noticed Bull covered her face as they passed dead bodies.

She didn’t know what the hell had happened, but something had. There were men lying on the ground. She saw a couple of them as Bull didn’t cover her eyes in time.

As they made it outside, she saw a large van waiting for them.

They were stopped by Dylan, who put his hand on Bull’s chest.

“You’re going to have to do with that cleanup,” Bull said. “But believe me, you’ve just been the one responsible for finding the Vito Crew in a drug dispute.”

“For fuck’s sake, Bull. You think that is going to work?”

“It has to. I’ve got to get her to the hospital.”

Dylan looked at her and she saw he was fighting with wanting to order Bull to stay behind. “Fine. We’re still going to talk.”

Bull kissed the top of her head as Grant moved into the back of the van with them. Pat and Rusty climbed into the front of the car, and then, they were moving.

“I don’t know what happened,” Maddie said.

“Bull had a tracker in my cell phone,” Grant said. “The moment they took us, he could track our cells. It was something our paranoid dad did to the club, but Bull took the idea to take care of me, his baby brother.”

“I sent Grant to keep an eye on you. I knew something bad was going to go down, and the only person I had was Grant.”

“I don’t have the best reputation for making good decisions, but this one, oh, yeah, I did good.” Grant winced. “Maybe not so great. I gave them a good target for my head.”

“Are you okay?” Bull asked.

“Yeah, I’ll be fine. Give me a hot nurse and I’ll be right as rain.”

“So you never left the club?” Maddie asked as the two brothers shook hands then bumped fists. She should have known they were friends on some level. They were brothers first, then club. They could pretend to be something different, but that wasn’t the case, not anymore. Maddie saw it as they looked at each other.

“Should have known you wouldn’t just leave the club,” Rusty said. “Did you know?”

“They’re brothers,” Pat said, as if that was an explanation.

Maddie didn’t know what to think. There was pain in her cheek and her knee, and she felt sick.

They arrived at the hospital, and Bull kicked up a fuss for the two of them to be seen, which she hated.

As it happened, there was a lot of blood spilling from her cheek, and Grant, well, he decided to faint for some reason. She knew it was fake because the moment he hit the floor, he looked at her and gave her a big thumbs up.

Nurses surrounded him, and she was shown to a bed with the curtain pulled all around it. Bull followed her.

“Do you want to go and see your brother?” Maddie asked.

“I will. The club will keep an eye on him for me. I want to make sure you’re okay.”

“I’m fine,” she said.

“Maddie.”

She held her hand up. “Please, not right now.”

“You can’t say anything about ... what you saw.”

Maddie looked at him and nodded. “I know.”

“Everything I said, I meant it.”

“The part where I’m too fat to love.”

“No, that part, it was all lies. None of that is true.”

“Bull, I don’t know what to believe right now. I just want to ... I want to get my face fixed and go home so I can sleep.” She gasped. “The dogs we were taking on walks, are they fine?”

“Yes. I called Hellen. The dogs returned to the shelter.”

“Good, that is good.”

“Maddie, I’m in love with you.”

“Bull, I can’t do this right now.” She looked at him and pressed her lips together. “I know what you said to Julio, but...”

“You’re still remembering that day at the diner.”

“Yes.”

“Maddie, I did it there on purpose.”

“So everyone could see my pain? See how humiliated you wanted to make me?”

“I never wanted to humiliate you. Never. I love you. I love you so damn much.” Bull sighed. “You’re going to hear it soon, anyway, so ... Beatrice and Carl, they’re your real parents.”

Maddie frowned. “What?”

“They have been wanting to tell you for a while. They were young when they caught. Too young, and they had no choice. Your adopted parents, Neal and Delia French, bought you. They must have seen an opportunity,” Bull said. “I don’t know how it all worked, but they’re your real parents, and I knew breaking up with you, it would give them a chance to make things right.”

“I can’t believe this.”

“I know. It’s a lot to take in.”

The doctor chose that moment to open the curtain, and Maddie was so pleased for the distraction. The pain in her cheek was nothing compared to the one in her heart.

One week later

"Maddie still doesn't want to see you?" Grant asked, coming into the garage's waiting room. A week ago, it had been a mess. It was still a mess but on a much larger scale.

Ending Julio's life hadn't fixed his problems, it had created more of them. Maddie hadn't come back to him. She was still at that small apartment and working with Beatrice and Carl.

At least that little secret was out of the bag. Maddie deserved to know the truth.

Bull stared off into the distance, wishing all of his problems had been solved, but Maddie was more distant than ever.

"No," he said.

"Look, man, she's hurting."

"I know."

Grant sighed. His brother had made a full recovery after being diagnosed with a concussion. The club had taken it in turns to be with him every single night, and to always be by his side.

He'd been given back his leather cut, along with his VP badge. There were times Bull thought about removing it, giving it to someone else, but Grant was his brother.

"Are you still pissed at me?" Grant asked.

"I'm not pissed at you. I don't know how to win her back," Bull said. "I love her. I admitted it to that fucking cretin. What more do I have to do?"

"Bull, you told her that she wasn't good enough to be yours. To some women, that's a big fucking deal, and Maddie, I don't think she's had it easy, not ever. You hit her where everyone has hurt her. Including me."

His hands clenched into fists, and Grant took a step back.

"Right, you don't want to hear about me hurting your woman, like ever, do you?"

"I'd appreciate it if you didn't tell me," Bull said. He struggled to hold it together.

“So, let’s stick to much easier topics. What’s going on with William?” Grant asked.

“He’s gone back to the city, and we’re back on friendly terms with the agreement we will never see one another again.”

“Sounds kinky,” Grant said. “I don’t know what the big deal is. Why are you here moping when you could be winning your woman over?”

“Grant, she doesn’t want me.”

“No, she doesn’t want that asshole at the diner that day. You’re not him. In front of the whole club, you admitted your feelings for this woman. They weren’t fake. They were very much real, and you can’t deny that now. We all heard you become a pussy. Now embrace that pussiness, and go get your woman.”

Bull glared at his brother.

“Too much?”

“I think you’ve been pampered for way too long,” he said.

“Pampered? Bull, please, there is no such thing.”

Bull got to his feet. He wasn’t going to get anything done sitting around the garage. “You need to start rounding up clients,” Bull said.

“You scared everyone away.”

“Win them back with that charming smile of yours.” Bull slapped his brother on the back. He got to the door and turned. “How did you know I was telling Maddie how I felt about her?”

“Wasn’t out for long. I came too long enough to feel a nice swift kick in the back, and I just knew you would’ve remembered the GPS tracker in my cell phone. Once you did, it didn’t take too long for you to figure out.” Grant smiled. “Now go. Go and win that woman you want so much.”

Bull left the garage, wrapping his jacket tight around himself as he walked out into the cold. His balls were fucking freezing.

Christmas was everywhere, apart from inside the garage.

Arriving at the diner, he spotted Maddie instantly. He’d always been able to see her. He wanted to check out how he looked, but he quickly shook his head. There was no way he was turning into his brother, and Grant was obsessed with his looks.

After stepping into the diner, he took a seat at the counter, where Beatrice glared at him.

“You’re welcome,” he said.

"I thought I said I didn't want your kind in here."

"I was figuring that was before I helped save your daughter, told her who you were, breaking the ice, and I think you should know I'm still very much in love with her."

Beatrice glared at him. "I don't know if I like you."

"Join the club. I don't think a lot of people like me."

He waited.

"Fine. Fine. You can stay, but if Maddie gets upset by seeing you, then you're out. Got it?"

He put a hand to his heart as if he was hurting.

Beatrice kept her glare.

Maddie's soft laughter could be heard over the noise of the diner and the constant run of conversations between each table.

"Go easy on her," Beatrice said.

"I love her. I'm not here to hurt her."

Beatrice licked her lips, looking back at Maddie, then to Bull. "The Frenches weren't good people. Maddie has talked a little about her life with them. That Delia, she made my girl feel like she was ugly and fat." Beatrice had tears in her eyes, and Bull tensed up. "I know she deals with weight and appearance issues, but I didn't realize they stemmed from the people who claimed they were going to love her."

Bull reached across the counter and put his hand on Beatrice's hand. "You've got her back, and nothing is going to take that away from you. Not even me."

"You treat her like a fucking princess."

"No, I'm going to treat her like a queen." He pulled his hand away as Maddie rounded the counter. The smile she had on her lips died.

"Hey," she said.

"Hey."

"I got the flowers. They were pretty."

"I'm glad," he said. It had been Pat's idea to send her the flowers. "What about the chocolates?"

"I'm not eating chocolate anymore. They ... er..."

"I ate them," Beatrice said. "Maddie didn't want to see them going to waste, and she didn't."

Maddie nodded. Her face was bright red.

He watched her. He couldn't not.

She was so beautiful, and it killed him that she didn't see it herself. It was a shame Delia and Neal were already dead. He'd have gladly killed them for the damage they had done.

Bull drank some coffee. Then another cup. Watching Maddie, keeping an eye on her. When his stomach began to grumble, he ordered a burger and fries. Ate them while also watching Maddie.

The uniform she wore was too big for her.

By the time five o'clock came, he knew what it meant. She was going to leave and would be heading to the gym.

Bull paid his bill for all of the coffee and the food.

Grant had given him the spare key to her apartment.

Standing at the bottom of the steps in the freezing cold, he was tempted to use it, but he decided against it for that day. Maddie didn't need to be scared out of her mind.

He waited for her. She didn't take long to change out of her work clothes and into her workout ones. She'd also pulled on a hat.

She locked the door to her apartment, pocketed the key, and stopped when she caught sight of him.

"Are you following me around?" she asked.

"Yes."

"At least you're not lying about it."

"I've already lied to you enough times. I'm not going to do it anymore."

Maddie started to laugh.

"Why are you laughing?" he asked.

"No, I just, I can't help but laugh at all of this." She pointed at him then herself. "I bet you don't even remember, or do you just force a girl to make a promise and then not keep it?"

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

She shrugged. "You promised me you wouldn't lie to me. You told me not to lie to you, and I didn't, but now, you openly admit to lying to me and you're following me around like it's okay."

"Maddie, please."

"I don't know what you want from me," she said.

"I want the chance to talk. To make things right."

She looked past his shoulder. "I have an appointment."

"You don't have to go."

"Look, some guy is going to want ... that. It's not me. I'm sorry. I've found out what I really want. No guy wants a fat chick, ever.' Those are the words, you said to me, Bull."

"They were all lies," he said.

"Lies or not, I can't get them out of my head. Between my mom—" She stopped. "No, between Delia and everyone else in the world, do you think I can keep pretending they're not true?"

He stepped toward her, cupping her face.

There was still a Band-Aid on her cheek. She had to have stitches, and they would be coming out soon. She'd have a small scar as a memory.

He loved this woman. Scars and all.

Sinking his fingers into her hair, he tugged back the strands and kissed her hard. Maddie accepted the kiss for all of five seconds before she pushed him away.

He expected that. Knew deep down that he deserved to be pushed away. Maddie deserved so much more than him.

"No," she said.

"Maddie, please."

"You think I don't want to? You think I don't ... you hurt me, Bull. I didn't even see it coming. I ... I don't know if I can trust you." She swiped at the tears threatening to spill over.

"Tell me how I can earn your trust."

"I don't know. I need to make this appointment." She moved around him.

He hated letting her go, and he wasn't going to admit defeat.

Spinning on his heel, he followed her to the gym. Just seeing the sign made him sneer, but he stepped up to the building and walked right inside.

Jase, the man he'd never met personally, was on the reception desk. He didn't like him on sight. There was nothing wrong with the man at all. Bull thought about Dylan's background check. It explained why the man kept to himself.

"How can I help you?" Jase asked.

"It looks like I'm joining the gym."

Jase checked out his leather cut and the two just knew.

“Are you sure you want to check out my gym?”

Bull pulled out his wallet. “How much?”

“Monthly or annually?”

“Just get me signed up so I can use this place whenever I want to,” Bull said.

He watched as Jase visibly swallowed.

“You and Maddie go running in the mornings,” Bull said.

“Yes, we do.”

“What time?” Bull asked.

“Six.”

“Where do you meet?”

“Her place. I mean, I go and see her at her place and then we run together.”

He made this man nervous. Bull was more than happy with that. “I’m going to be joining you.”

“We run every day,” Jase said.

“Not a problem. Where will you be training Maddie today?” Bull asked, throwing down a couple of extra twenties.

“I don’t want your money.”

“Let’s get something straight. Maddie is mine. She will always be mine. You want to come between us, you just see what happens.”

“I don’t,” Jase said. “I don’t want to come between anything. I promise. Maddie likes to swim. She’ll be in the pool.”

“Good, and you won’t be needed today,” Bull said.

“I’m her personal trainer.”

Bull glared at him, waiting for him to argue, but Jase must have known what was good for him because he backed off.

“Good. Now, where are those swimming trunks I’m going to need?”

He was going to earn Maddie’s trust one way or another. There was no backing down. He loved her. There were no lies there.

He wanted her badly.

Too much time had already been wasted, and he wasn’t going to waste another second.

Chapter Twenty-One

Maddie completed her stretches just as she saw Bull enter the pool. No one else was in the pool today, and she couldn't think of a quick exit.

She stood and waited as he came toward her.

"You haven't hurt Jase, have you?"

"Nope. He's dealing with my application, and we both realized it would be better if I was here instead of him."

She shook her head. "You can't do this."

"Sure I can. Seeing as I just did."

"Damn it, Bull. This is ... I ... I need space."

"You'll get the space you need."

"No, this is not space. This is bullying me."

"Maddie, I'm here for you."

"You're not. You're here for yourself." She went to move to the edge of the pool to climb out, but Bull stopped her. His hands were on her hips, and as he drew her back, she felt the hard length of his cock.

She gasped.

"Yeah, I know you feel me, babe."

"It doesn't mean anything."

"These past few weeks have been the loneliest of my whole life." His lips brushed across her neck.

"I came here to work out."

"Then work out. Don't go." He still didn't let her go. "My need for you has never disappeared. I love you, Maddie."

She wanted to believe him.

"I've got to swim." She pulled out of his arms.

"Look, some guy is going to want ... that. It's not me. I'm sorry. I've found out what I really want. No guy wants a fat chick, ever."

Those were the words that kept going on inside her head.

Of course, the words *fat* and *ugly* were at the top of the list as well.

She hated them.

She hated feeling this way.

Maddie started with the breaststroke, aware of Bull so close to her. He was never going to give up. That was clear, but why? She knew he said he

loved her, but could she believe him? For every time his words echoed with what he said to Julio, she remembered the breakup even more.

She pushed herself back and forth across the pool, starting with the breaststroke, then moving to the backstroke.

Time passed. She got to the end of the pool, and Bull was there.

Wiping the water from her face, she climbed out of the pool. He was messing with her space.

How could she get over him if he was always there?

Bull wasn't to be ignored though. He surprised her as he followed her into the shower. Capturing her hands, pressing them above her head.

"I know you don't believe me, Maddie, but I promise you, I'm in love with you. I've been in love with you for some time."

He didn't give her a chance to say anything before his lips were on hers, his tongue tracing across her bottom lip. She wanted to deny him, but she opened up, and he plundered her mouth, making her moan. Her body ached as his hands wrapped around her waist.

She hadn't moved her hands from above her head, but she finally did, gripping his shoulders in one second, only to push him away in the next.

Bull pressed his head against hers and groaned. "Fuck, Maddie, I need you."

"Let me go."

"Never." He released her and stepped out of the shower.

She collapsed against the wall, her heart pounding.

Why couldn't he see this was killing her?

She washed the chlorine from her skin and went to her pile of clothes. She didn't take the time to dry, but quickly pulled them on and left the gym. Jase was at the front desk, and she didn't wait to say goodbye.

Pulling her hat on her wet hair, she ran to her apartment.

No one followed her.

No sign of Bull.

No sign of his club.

She quickly entered her home, locked the door, and collapsed against it.

Tears filled her eyes as she pulled her legs up to her body, sniffing.

"I'm fine. More than fine."

They were all the wrong words. There was nothing fine with this feeling.

She didn't know how long it took for her to get to her feet and walk to her shower. She stripped out of her clothes, knowing it was stupid to walk home soaking wet in this weather.

Stepping beneath the shower, she stayed until she was warm enough to the touch. Then she climbed out, wrapped a towel around her, and went to her bedroom.

Grant no longer stayed with her, so she didn't need to worry about him seeing her in a towel.

After changing into a pair of pajamas, she dried her hair on the towel and decided against food as she'd been feeling sick all day.

Once inside her bed, she closed her eyes, snuggling into the warmth.

"Look, some guy is going to want ... that. It's not me. I'm sorry. I've found out what I really want. No guy wants a fat chick, ever."

She pressed her hands to her ears, hoping that simple action would help remove those horrible words. They were on repeat, threatening to drive her insane. Tears fell from her eyes.

Slowly, the world began to fade as precious sleep claimed her.

Maddie didn't know how long she was asleep before she was brought awake with arms wrapped around her.

Panic filled her.

"Maddie, it's me. Babe, it's me. It's Bull. You were having a nightmare." He had her pinned to the bed. He'd somehow turned the light on and she saw the noticeable scratches on his cheek.

"Bull?"

"Yeah, it's me."

"How did you know I was having a nightmare?" she asked.

She had been. Julio had been alive, and she'd been back in that chair. He had a knife, but he hadn't stopped at one slash, or her knee. He'd kept on hurting her as she begged Bull to save her.

In her dreams, Bull never arrived. She was always alone with a mad man.

"You don't want to know the answer to that."

To what?

Oh.

“Grant gave you his key?” She’d been asking him for the key back.

“Yes.”

“You’re watching me?”

“Maddie, I have always been watching you. There’s not a day I’m not watching you.”

She looked around her room. Her body shook with a fever, and she pressed her palm to her temple.

“I’m going to let you go now. Please, don’t hit me.”

She nodded. “I won’t.” Her stomach hurt. Maddie was on fire. She whimpered.

“What’s the matter, babe?” Bull asked.

“I don’t know. I think I’m sick.”

“Running soaking wet and in freezing weather will do that for you.”

“No, I was feeling sick before this.” She groaned. Her stomach turned and then she had no choice but to push Bull out of the way as she ran to the bathroom. She only just made it as the first wave of sickness hit. Throwing up everything she’d tried to eat today, which wasn’t a whole lot, made her feel even worse.

Her whole body tightened and convulsed as she threw up more.

Bull was there, holding her hair as she vomited, rubbing her back.

It shouldn’t feel good him being there, but she liked it. Damn her, she did like it.

“I’m here, Maddie.”

She didn’t want him here, and at the same time, she did, so much.

When nothing else would come out of her, she flushed the toilet, reached for some tissue, and wiped her mouth. She felt even worse.

“Maddie, have you taken a pregnancy test?” he asked.

“I’m not pregnant.”

“I wasn’t careful.”

She groaned. “I’m not pregnant.”

He pulled out his cell phone, and she sighed. “What are you doing?”

“Getting Grant to get a pregnancy test.”

“No, you can’t do that.”

“I can.”

“No. I’m not pregnant.” Hellen had told her at the animal shelter there was a sickness bug going around and the flu. This felt very much like that.

She told him that.

“Maddie, you were feeling fine.”

“No, I wasn’t. I haven’t felt great all day. I didn’t realize this is what it is. Hellen was sick yesterday. It’s at the animal shelter, and I’ve been there most days.” She released a cough, then held her stomach as pains rushed through her body. “Pregnancy doesn’t cause this.”

“You know that?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never been pregnant before. I’m assuming.” Talking was giving her a headache. “I feel so sleepy.”

“You’re not going to sleep,” he said.

She sighed and moved to the bathroom floor. Why did people need beds when the bathroom floor was so nice and cold and comfortable? Maddie pressed her cheek to the cool surface.

Bull pulled some of her hair out of the way.

“I need to cut it.”

“No, you don’t.”

“It looks a mess.”

“You’re not cutting your hair,” he said.

“You’re not the boss of me.” She huffed. She heard the door being rapped, and she groaned. “Tell him to be quiet. He’s way too loud.”

Bull chuckled. He left her alone, and Maddie hated how she missed him. It was on the tip of her lips to call him back, but she stayed silent. There was no point in telling him to come back.

“Oh, bathroom floor, you feel so good.”

“Last time I checked, a pregnant woman isn’t shivering, and enjoying the bathroom floor as if it is a comfort blanket.”

Maddie smiled and looked up. “Hey, evil Grant, you’re back.”

“Evil Grant.”

“You were always so cruel to me in high school. You’re evil. You know my not-mom would say you were always telling the truth. I was an ugly, fat girl. No one would want me.” She sighed. “Good times with my not-mom.”

“I think it is time to call the doctor,” Grant said.

“Nope, no doctor. Bull wants me to pee on a stick to prove I’m not pregnant with his babies. He doesn’t want to have babies with me because

I'm too fat. He wants those other women at the clubhouse." She sighed. "You two need to leave."

She was babbling and knew she'd regret even opening her mouth if she didn't get them out.

"Get out," she said. She got to her feet, but the ground was spinning under her. "Tell the earth to stop moving."

She groaned, seeing the ground coming toward her, but she never touched it. Instead, she was floating, and then some nice soft ground swallowed her up.

"This is nice. I like this." Maddie opened her eyes, and Bull was there, his hands on her forehead.

"I love you so much, you know. It hurt to see you. I ... I've never been so upset about a person telling me I was fat and ugly than with you."

"Maddie, they were all lies."

"No, they weren't. It's why I am working out. I am going to be thin and pretty." She sighed. "Then you might love me again."

Warm hands touched her, and they were too hot. She groaned, trying to get away.

"I am in love with you. I don't want you to change. I love you just the way you are."

"I don't think you should kiss her, man. She is seriously sick."

"I don't care."

They were talking, and the world was spinning. Her stomach turned and she closed her eyes. "I need to sleep. I'll feel better in the morning. Must sleep. Will take pregnancy tomorrow. Want babies so badly."

She sighed, and her eyes felt so heavy. Too heavy to lift.

The world stopped spinning, and then everything became peaceful again.

"Any change?" Carl asked.

"None. The doctor has said she is going to be fine. It is a sickness and flu-like bug going around. With Maddie running home in the cold, he thinks it escalated it. He used a lot of big and fancy terms to say she got sick fast and hard." Bull glanced back toward the bedroom. He hadn't left Maddie's apartment in three days, and he hadn't wanted to.

The doctor didn't think it was a good idea to move her. To let her get over the worst and then take her back to his place where he could better look after her.

"Beatrice will be by later with some hot soup."

"Do you want to see her? She's not awake and is out of it most of the time." Bull wasn't going to tell Carl how much of her life she had told him about in her sickened state. The cruelty of the people who adopted her. She had to live with someone telling her just how much she didn't measure up for most of her life.

No wonder she was having a hard time forgiving him. With everything he heard, he wouldn't have forgiven him either.

Maddie believed the lies. He had to get her to see the truth.

"Yes, I'd like to."

They walked into the bedroom, and Maddie was curled up, sleeping peacefully at least. Bull had been woken up plenty of times by her screams. Julio still lingered in her nightmares, and he couldn't seem to be able to get the man out of there, which fucking infuriated him. He didn't want anyone hurting his woman, imagined or real.

"I can't believe she knows the truth," Carl said. "You know, we watched her for years. Seeing her grow up. Every time Delia brought her to the diner, it was like a gift. We would do anything for her."

"Don't think of Delia as a good person."

"We don't. Maddie told us some."

"It doesn't even hit the surface of what she went through because of that woman."

"She seemed like such a good person," Carl said. "Beatrice and I, we wanted a baby so much, but the diner had so much debt, and so did we. It was at a time in our life when we just couldn't afford the expense, and I hate myself for even thinking in those terms."

"Life throws us shit all the time. We've got to learn to deal with it."

Carl reached out and took Maddie's hand. "We lost so much but we've gained even more. She is really something, and it kills me she doesn't see it. She doesn't see how beautiful she is. How kind and gentle."

"People have fucked with her head for the last time. I'm not going to let anyone else get close to her." He was going to protect her from the world if he had to.

“You do love her?”

“More than anything in my life. She is my reason for breathing.” He moved to the other side of her, reaching out to stroke back her hair. Perspiration dotted her brow. He reached for the cloth and wrung it out, pressing the damp cloth to her forehead. “The doctor said it could help.”

“Beatrice and I, we talked about making you steer completely clear of her.”

“Not going to happen.”

“We know you love her. We just don’t know if it’s strong enough.”

“Maddie is mine,” he said. “Mine to love. You’ve been in her life two minutes.”

“So have you.”

“And you gave her up willingly. What I did, I did for her own safety.” He would argue tit-for-tat for as long as he had to. They needed to see they weren’t getting rid of him. Not now. Not ever.

She settled back down, and Carl sighed. “We know you love her.”

“Good.”

“We won’t get in the way. Maddie needs someone to love her. To always be there for her and we know that person is you.”

Bull looked up. “What was that crap then?”

Carl frowned. “I’ve got to do what is best for her, but we’ve never had the chance to get this right. I’m doing my best.” He glanced down at his watch. “I’ve got to head back. Beatrice will be by later.”

“You’ve said.”

Bull didn’t want to leave Maddie alone, but he did to let Carl out.

Returning to the bedroom, he found Maddie with her eyes open.

“How long were you awake?”

“I heard a lot,” she said.

“He wants to be your dad.”

“I know, I ... it’s strange. My parents died some time ago, and ... it makes me a bad person, but part of me was glad about that. They were never good people. Now there’s Beatrice and Carl, and ... I don’t know what to think.”

He moved closer to the bed. “How are you feeling?”

“Sick. My stomach hurts. My head hurts. Every single part of me hurts.” She pushed some of her hair off her face. “Have you been here the

whole time?”

“Yep.”

She sighed. “You should leave.”

“Not going to happen. I’m not leaving you.”

“You’re going to end up sick yourself, and that’s not going to be good.”

“Will you feel guilty?” he asked, coming toward the bed.

She glared at him, but she looked so exhausted it had stopped being cute.

“Get some sleep. Beatrice will be stopping by later.”

She sighed. “Fine.”

“Do you want me to get rid of her?”

“No, it’s fine.”

“I’m not going anywhere.”

“I don’t think you should be here.”

“I’m still sticking around.”

She released the cutest little growl he’d ever heard, rolled over, and went back to sleep.

Bull cleaned her apartment and opened up a window to allow fresh air in. Saw Beatrice when she came.

Maddie was conveniently out of it. He couldn’t be sure if it was the sickness or Maddie looking for an excuse not to talk to her real mother. She stayed asleep even after Beatrice left, so he figured she was not feeling her best.

For the next couple of days, all he did was take care of Maddie, and he had no problem with that. Random guys from the club would stop by to give him chance to shower by keeping an eye on her.

Hellen stopped by to apologize and promised everyone had gotten better soon.

By the sixth day, Maddie was awake and feeling moody. “I don’t need you to stick around anymore,” she said, throwing her blankets off. “I didn’t need you to stick around to begin with. I don’t need a babysitter.”

“Anyone ever tell you that you’re kind of a buzzkill?” he asked.

She glared at him, which he did find so cute. “You’re so cute.” He winked at her.

“You’re not fair.” She looked at her body and sighed. “I need to take a shower.”

He didn’t give her a chance to back down. Bull picked her up in his arms and noticed a weighable difference with her, and he didn’t like it.

“You need to stop losing weight,” he said.

“You need to put me down and stop telling me what to do,” she said, offering him another glare.

“No can do. I’m your man, Maddie. You know it, I know it. You’re just being too damn stubborn for your own good.”

“This isn’t going to make me fall for you,” she said.

“I don’t want you to fall for me.”

He felt her still in his arms. “You don’t?”

“Nope. You’ve already fallen for me. What I need is for you to forgive me.”

“Not happening.”

“You will.”

“You do have a mighty big opinion of yourself, don’t you?” she asked.

“I know what I’m good at, and if that means I’ve got a big opinion of myself, then I guess I do.” He lowered her to the toilet.

Bull turned the shower on and then pulled his shirt off over his head, tossing it to the floor.

“What are you doing?”

“Do you think after I’ve seen how exhausted and tired you’ve been, I’m going to let you get into that death trap alone?”

“It’s a shower.”

“It’s got a whole lot of things wrong with it. Lots of hard pointy surfaces for you to bang your head on. Not happening.”

“You’re insufferable.”

“And you’re mine.”

“You keep saying that.”

“Because I mean it.” He stripped down to nothing, and when he started to remove her clothes, she gave his hands a slap. “Stop it.”

“Maddie, it’s not like I’ve not seen it all before.”

“Why?” she asked.

“I love you. I love you more every single day, and I will keep telling you this until you’re sick and tired of hearing it. You’re the love of my life.” He gripped the back of her neck and roughly kissed her. “And I will always love you.”

Maddie didn’t fight him as he stripped off her clothes. She stayed perfectly stiff. He lifted her into his arms, and he was only human, so he couldn’t help his arousal.

She didn’t squirm or take any notice of his rock-hard dick. He was finding it hard not to notice. Her body had started to tone up. The roundness of her stomach had reduced, as did her ass. He didn’t like it.

Some men loved a slender, toned body. He wanted his woman to have her curves back.

Bull hated himself more than ever at the feel of just how different she was in his arms.

Pressing his face against her neck, he breathed her in, basking in her scent. “I love you,” he said.

She sniffled.

Leaning back, he saw tears fall from her eyes.

“You broke my heart.”

He wrapped his arms around her, feeling his own world shatter as she finally let go. This was worse than suffering any kind of torture. He wasn’t lying when he said Maddie was his whole world. She was.

The sobs broke from her, and there was far more to it than what he’d seen. Maddie was feeling all of the hurt, the heartbreak, and the pain inflicted by others. The name-calling. The stood-up dates. Him. Grant. Her parents. All of it.

He ran his hands down her back, being her rock when she needed it most. “I’ve got you,” he said. Bull didn’t know how long they stood in that shower for before Maddie calmed down.

She’d needed to cry.

Bull was pleased he’d been the one to let her do it.

She pulled away from him first, and he didn’t stop her. He grabbed the bar of soap and a sponge and began to work on soaping her body, washing away the illness that had affected her the past few days.

Maddie stayed perfectly still, allowing him to clean her up and take care of her.

After the shower, he dried her completely, making sure her hair was also dry. He found a brand-new pair of pajamas and helped her into them.

He settled her into bed before he headed for the small kitchen to make her some food.

For several minutes, he stood in the kitchen, frozen, feeling every inch the piece-of-shit boyfriend he'd been. He'd known hitting where it hurt would be the most effective, but he just didn't realize how badly it would hurt her, and now, she was broken.

Bull clenched his hands into fists, gritting his teeth and allowing the anger to dissipate before getting her some food together. He wanted to kill every single person who had ever done her wrong, and that put him at the top of the list. He couldn't kill himself, but what he could do was make sure she never felt that way again.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Four days later

Maddie hadn't gotten any Christmas shopping in, and they were only days away. Carl and Beatrice had invited her over for dinner, and for the day. They wanted to have a family dinner, but she had declined.

They were a lovely couple, and she knew they would have made fantastic parents, but she had to get used to the idea of them, and it wasn't easy. She still had her memories with Delia.

As she walked down the main street, she stopped at several shops and glanced at what they had on display in the windows. She had a lot of people to buy for this year.

She was usually a lot better at making decisions than this.

Her cell phone rang, and she picked it up, seeing it was Bull calling.

"Hello," she said.

"Hey. How are you doing?" he asked.

She frowned. "You don't sound so good."

"I feel ... fine." He coughed a little more. "Totally fine."

She always said the word *fine*.

"Have you been sick? What about your temperature?"

"Maddie, I'm fine. Tell me what you're doing."

"I'm looking for Christmas presents," she said. "I've got a long list to buy for."

"Are you planning on getting me a gift?" he asked.

"No. You're still in my bad books." After Bull had nursed her back to full health, staying mad at him was a hard thing to do. In fact, as he visited the diner, offering her her old job back, everything was hard.

She didn't want to give in too easily, but at the same time, she also didn't want to be horrible to him.

That time in the shower, looking into his eyes and admitting he'd hurt her, something inside her changed. She wasn't angry at him, nor did she need to find a reason to forgive him.

Deep down, she had known he had a reason to do it with Julio and everything that went down that day. Bull had been trying to protect her from the start.

“Well, I will make it into your good books, so you’re going to need to put me on the good list.”

She smiled. “Yeah?”

“I’ve got a cunning, master plan to make you fall in love with me.”

“You do? That sounds like a lot of fun.”

“It will be. Are you opposed to lots of orgasms?”

Maddie glanced around the street, wondering if anyone had heard him. “Er, I don’t think we should talk about this over the phone.”

“Phone sex will make it easier for you to forgive me. I’m gifted.”

“Bull, I’m going to hang up now.”

She didn’t move the phone as Bull started to cough.

“Bull?”

He didn’t answer. More coughing.

“I think I’m going to be sick.”

She heard some vomiting, and then the sound of someone slumping.

“Bull! Bull! Damn it, answer me.”

No answer.

She hung up the phone and immediately rushed toward an oncoming taxi. Maddie didn’t think. She put her hands flat to the car and told him to stop. The driver was someone she didn’t recognize. She gave him the directions and told him to floor it.

He didn’t.

With the snow and ice on the ground, he drove safely, and every other time, she would have appreciated it, but she couldn’t contain her panic. What if Bull had collapsed and was choking on his own vomit?

She nibbled on her lip, fear riding through her as the man drove. They passed the Chaos and Carnage MC clubhouse, and just a little further, the taxi finally came to a stop. She hoped she wasn’t too late.

Paying the man, she gave him a tip, then climbed out of the car and rushed toward the house, letting herself in through the side gate. The past few weeks of doing a lot of running paid off. She was out of breath, but not by too much.

At his front door, she twisted the handle, but found it locked. “Shit!”

Searching under the plant pots, she found the key beneath the plant pot on the corner. As her heart raced, her hands shook while she pushed the

key into the lock. Twisting it, she slammed the door closed and looked in the rooms of the house.

“Bull? Bull, where are you?” she asked.

She took to the stairs when she didn’t see him around the house. He wasn’t in his bedroom, and so she went to the bathroom.

Vomit was on the floor and Bull, completely naked, was on the floor beside it.

“Crap.”

He shivered.

Maddie moved to his side, and with all of her might, lifted him. “I’ve got you.”

Bull groaned. “Maddie, am I dreaming?”

“No dreams.” She tried to haul him to his feet, but she was no match for his size. “I’ve got you, but I’m going to need you to help me.”

“My mouth feels like a dog has taken a shit in it.”

“Colorful,” she said. She helped him onto the toilet, but the moment she tried to leave him to get a toothbrush, he began to sway.

“Ah, no you don’t.” She kept him sitting up and nibbled on her lip. “Right, let me get you to the bed.”

Bull moaned all the way to the bed. She collapsed down with him. His large arm went around her waist and pulled her close. “You smell so good.”

She wriggled out from beneath him, taking a deep breath when she was finally free. “Just stay. Don’t move. I will be back in a second.” This wasn’t going well.

Pushing her hair out of her face, she rushed back to the bathroom and decided to clean up all of his mess. Once that was finished, she filled a bowl with some warm water and went to the bedroom.

Bull was flat on his stomach, looking cute.

Was this how she looked?

His heavily inked body distracted her. “Focus, Maddie, focus.”

She put the bowl down on the cabinet beside the bed and removed her coat and shoes. She wore a pair of jeans that were now a couple of sizes too big. With heartache, she’d stopped eating, and it had been great for weight loss. Jase had already told her he felt their classes should come to a close. Bull had told him about the years of abuse she’d suffered at the hands of her

parents, and Jase didn't believe in training someone who first had to face the problems of her past.

Maddie had been pissed at Bull, but at the same time, it wasn't the right reason to lose weight.

Had she been losing weight for herself, or because of what everyone else had told her?

She shoved those thoughts to one side and instead, focused on giving Bull a sponge bath. He looked terrible. The illness had kicked her ass and being the man he was, she knew he was going to play the man flu card.

Bull wasn't an easy man to move around. He was difficult on every single level.

She had no choice but to clean him up. After he was washed, she tried to clean his teeth, but he started to complain everything hurt.

Maddie cleaned him up as best as she could without starting to fight him. She got to work cleaning his house and getting ready for someone to take care of him. Except, Pat, Grant, Rusty, all of his men had things they needed to do, leaving her in charge of the awful patient.

The first day, he slept. The second day, he missed the toilet three times, and she had no choice but to clean up vomit.

By the third day, he was back into complaining mode about everything and anything. Four and five were the same. Day six, she managed to get him into the bath, and she'd made a large batch of vegetable soup.

"Is this awful crap your *trainer* told you to eat?" Bull asked.

"You haven't even tried it yet, and no, he didn't. This is soup that I came up with myself." She liked spicy food and had added in a whole lot of spice to help the veggies to pop. She sat on a stool she'd dragged into the bathroom while Bull lay in the tub surrounded by a load of bubbles.

She was pampering him.

"Well?" she asked.

"It tastes very good."

"See, not everything I do is bad, and just so you know, Jase is no longer training me."

"He's not?"

"He doesn't feel comfortable, and he thinks I need to talk to someone." She shrugged. "I don't want to talk to anyone, so I guess I will

have to see what happens.”

“Maddie, you’re perfect the way you are,” he said.

“Don’t, Bull.”

“Damn it, I wish you could truly see who you really are.” He slammed his fist against the side of the bath and she winced.

“Don’t do that,” she said. “Don’t go hurting yourself.”

“Everyone else is fucking lying.”

“Bull, please, no one else is lying.”

“They are.” He ran fingers through his hair, and he looked so poorly and pitiful. She held up the spoon of soup.

“Don’t worry about it. Just enjoy your food.”

“Maddie, please.”

She offered him a smile. “I’m not upset.”

“If only I could get you to see…” He turned to look at her then took the soup. “What would you tell your daughter who looked like you?”

Maddie froze as she dipped the spoon into the bowl. “Bull, that’s not fair.”

“What’s not fair? You’d tell your daughter who looked like you that she’s what? Ugly? That she doesn’t measure up? Will you be exactly like that piece of shit who ruined your life?”

“No, of course not.”

He snorted. “You’re telling me you’d lie to her.”

“My daughter wouldn’t look like me.”

“But there’s a fifty-fifty chance she would. What would you do then?” he asked.

“This isn’t fair.”

Bull stood up, and she caught sight of his cock. He didn’t seem to realize he was completely naked as he grabbed her hand, and without any warning, marched her across his bathroom, to the bedroom, where there was a mirror.

His wet body pressed against her back as he grabbed her chin. His touch wasn’t hard, but it was firm.

“Look at your daughter. Look at her and you tell her that she doesn’t deserve love. You tell her that she needs to change to suit the needs of others. You tell her that even though a man loves her more than anything

else in the world, she has no right to be with him!” The last part was said on a snap.

“Bull.”

“Tell her.”

“I can’t.”

“Why?”

“Because I would never tell my daughter something so horrible.” Tears filled her eyes, and she didn’t wipe them away, nor did Bull attempt to stop them from falling.

“Maddie, stare at your daughter right now, and you tell her, not yourself, you tell her with tears in her eyes, exactly what you would say to her when a bully tells her she is ugly, that she is fat, that she is not worthy.”

Bull knew what he was doing. There was no way she could be so cruel to her daughter, but she had to stop feeling this way. The Frenches were toxic people, and she needed to stop that line of thinking. She was trapped in a horrible cycle of negativity and pain.

Maddie didn’t see herself in the mirror, she saw her daughter.

“You’re beautiful,” she said. “Don’t ever let anyone tell you that you’re anything but. You are beautiful, and people in this world are just spiteful, and they don’t see the true gift that you are.”

Bull’s arms were tight around her, and his lips were against her temple.

“Maddie, baby, thank you,” he said. “You are so much more than you even realize. You are beautiful, you are kind, you are everything, and I, for one, think you are the sexiest woman I have ever known.”

The tears fell thick and fast, and as they did, Maddie couldn’t describe it exactly, but it was like the weight of her body eased. She was no longer torn by the past.

It was time for her to move on, to be stronger, and to see that she had a lot more to give.

Christmas came and went in illness. Maddie was still taking care of him over the festive period and a few days after, which pissed Bull off.

It was a few days before New Year’s when he stood in his garage staring at the place, wishing Maddie was with him.

She hadn't returned to work even though he'd offered her the job. She'd refused him.

"Hey, Prez," Pat said. "The last of the cars has been collected. We've got nothing new to do."

"Fine."

Bull sat in the chair behind reception, fingering the velvet box he had for several weeks.

Pat knew he intended to propose to Maddie. "Bull, man, you okay?"

"No, I'm not okay."

The doorbell rang, and Pat groaned.

"Nice to know you've missed my sexy ass," Grant said. "What's the holdup?"

"Bull doesn't know what to do with his engagement ring," Pat said. "I think he wants to marry himself."

"I thought you were going to ask Maddie," Grant said, leaning against the counter.

Bull looked up at his young brother. "What do you want?"

"It's nearly New Year's. Come on, it's party all night at the clubhouse. You can't say you're not excited."

"I'm not excited. There, I said it quite easily."

Both of his men groaned, and Bull couldn't deny that he sounded like a child.

Opening the velvet box, he looked at the ring inside. It was a small ring with a tiny diamond. When he'd gone to find the perfect ring for Maddie, he'd known she wouldn't want anything too big or elaborate. She wasn't into material things. She was a woman who wanted to make memories, to be a family, and he didn't know how to tell her he wanted the same things.

"You know, I never figured my big brother would be a pussy."

Bull closed the box and stood. "What the fuck did you say to me?"

"Not as my prez. He is a kick-ass leader. He knows what he wants and he goes and takes it."

"Maddie isn't someone I can just take," he said.

"Sure you can. It would be so easy. She would love it, 'cause if you ask me, she's a woman that's not so used to being taken. She's a woman that's used to being overlooked."

“You don’t know her,” Bull said.

“Bull, man, do you love her?” Grant asked.

“You know I do.”

“And you’re going to make her happy?”

“Yes.”

“Then what are you waiting for? Go and get her. You publicly told her that you didn’t want her. Go and tell that diner full of people exactly how you feel about Maddie. Pat and I will have your back. You were a dick to her to keep her safe. Now be the hero and make her feel like a fucking queen. What did Thomas say?”

His best friend had advised that he go after his woman, and that he grovel, which he had been doing for a really long time.

“The boy’s got a point, and hell must have frozen over for me to have said that,” Pat said.

Grant slapped Pat on the chest. “Come on, dude, I’m in the zone. My brother already hates me.”

“I don’t hate you.”

“Right, we need to get him committed,” Grant said. “That man isn’t my brother.”

Bull rolled his eyes, but he got to his feet. Grant was right. Hell truly had frozen over for him to agree with his baby brother.

He tossed the keys at Pat and told him to lock up. Bull didn’t wait around. He took off, running toward the diner where his woman would be. Behind him, he heard Grant following close, but he didn’t stop.

Arriving at the diner within minutes of leaving the garage, he stopped and looked through the window. He spotted Maddie instantly in the middle of all of the customers.

The diner was always so busy in the town of Carnage. It was one of the reasons why he’d told her he didn’t want her in front of everyone.

“This is your chance,” Grant said.

He wanted to hit his brother, but instead, he opened the door and stepped inside. The noise was overpowering, and Maddie hadn’t even noticed he was there.

All of a sudden, Grant whistled loud enough for all to hear, and everyone went completely silent. Everyone turned toward him, including Maddie.

“My brother here has something to say, and it will only work if you guys shut the fuck up,” Grant said.

“Grant!”

“Sorry, Beatrice.”

Bull looked at Maddie. She glanced around the room, and he couldn’t look away. “Maddie French, I lied to you.”

“Bull, you don’t need to do this.”

“I lied because I said that no one would want a fat ugly girl, or whatever it was I said. I lied. You know why I lied, but I am here to set the record straight. I, Kirk Reynolds, am completely and totally in love with you. I think you’re the most beautiful woman I have ever seen. I want to spend the rest of my life with you, and you’re the only person I want. The only woman I ever want to be with, and I’m hoping you will see that I’m not lying to you. I will only ever love you.” He slowly lowered down to one knee.

He was a little unstable, but he made it. “Will you marry me?” he asked.

Silence rang out.

He stared at Maddie as she looked in shock.

“I kind of need an answer, babe,” he said.

Bull expected her to say no. He had hurt her so badly, and he had a horrible feeling he’d fucked up too much.

The diner waited. He didn’t care about what they said.

There were tears in her eyes as she nodded. He couldn’t recall ever being this nervous in his life. He’d looked death in the face, and it wasn’t like this.

“Yes,” she said.

“What?” Bull asked.

“Yes, I love you, too.”

Bull got to his feet as Maddie worked her way through the diners. Fortunately, they saw what was happening and moved out of the way. Within seconds, he had Maddie in his arms, and he sank his fingers into her hair, holding her close as he kissed her.

She melted against him, moaning.

“Bull, you didn’t have to do this,” she said between kisses.

“I did. You had to know that I’m being real. That this between us is right. I love you, Maddie, so fucking much, and that’s never going to change. I want you as my wife. The mother of my children. I want to grow old with you.”

“It also means you’re going to be his old lady,” Grant said.

“Shut up, Grant.”

Maddie glanced past his shoulder.

“Ignore him. He’ll be your brother-in-law, but if it would make you happy, I’ll disown him.”

She chuckled. “You can’t do that.”

“I can, Maddie. I will do anything for you.”

Beatrice cleared her throat. “I think my customers have gotten enough of a view for today. Maddie, you can go. Congratulations, and we will talk soon.” She hugged her daughter, and Carl came out as well.

Bull let her go long enough for her parents to hug her, but he didn’t want to let her go for too long.

Never again.

Leaving the diner, he pulled her into his arms, and Maddie chuckled, looking up at him.

“Forgive me,” he said.

“Bull, I’m going to marry you.”

“I know, but I don’t know how I will ever make it up to you.”

She pressed a finger against his lips. “Just love me. That’s all you need to do.”

“Then that’s so fucking easy, because I love you so much.” He pulled her close and pressed a kiss to her lips. He was never going to let her go, and he would prove to her that he would never hurt her again.

Epilogue

Five years later

"And you forgave him? And what happened to Runt?" Lindsey asked, stroking Runt's head.

Maddie smiled in the mirror, brushing her daughter's hair.

"You know what happened to Runt. Yes, I forgave him."

Bull had helped to invest in the animal shelter. It had taken some time, but all of the dogs were able to find loving homes, and those that were not, well, between the club, the brothers, and of course, her man, they had found a place of love for each of them. Runt had taken a real shine to Lindsey though. Runt had been with her through every single step of the way.

"Your mother has got a heart of gold," Bull said, coming into the bedroom. Their daughter was dressed for bed. Maddie had bought Lindsey a pair of Christmas pajamas that she hoped would convince her to go to sleep in time for the big day.

Ever since Lindsey could understand the idea of presents and Christmas, their little girl had been a nightmare to keep calm, but she loved it.

She and Bull had conceived on the day he'd proposed to her. Bull had taken her to his home and made love to her well into the New Year, and several days after. In the end, some of his club had invited themselves over to make sure they were both safe and well.

There were many moments over the last five years Maddie had loved, and she would remember well, but some just stood out to her. The day Bull proposed. Their wedding day and night. Their honeymoon. Lindsey's birth. Their first Christmas together. In fact, every single day with him was a dream come true.

She finished brushing Lindsey's hair as Bull grabbed their daughter and kissed her, then blew raspberries on her stomach.

Maddie laughed, quickly pulling back the bedsheets as he landed their daughter inside her bed.

"Now, you will stay here or Santa will not stop?"

"Daddy, why did you say all of those horrible things to Mommy?" Lindsey asked.

“Because I was trying to protect her from bad men and I thought I was doing the right thing.”

“But you love Mommy?”

Maddie smiled as Bull pulled her into his arms. “More than anything.”

“Do I have to love someone for saying mean things to me?” Lindsey asked.

“Who is saying mean things to you?” Bull asked.

“David is. He says I’m ugly.”

Maddie stepped close to her daughter, perching on the end of her bed and stroking her brown hair back from her face. “You ignore him. He doesn’t know what he’s talking about. You, Lindsey Reynolds, are a beautiful, sweet, young girl.”

Lindsey smiled. “I love you, Mommy.”

“I love you, too.”

“You listen to them, Maddie. You’re an ugly, fat girl, and don’t you go thinking anything but.”

Maddie shut off the memory. Delia French wasn’t her mother. Her lies and bitterness would never touch her daughter, just as they would never harm another day in her own life. Bull had given her the key to be strong, but it had been her who needed to unlock her own power.

She was beautiful, kind, smart, loving, and no one could take that from her. Not another woman, not a man, not even Bull. She was the one with the power, and she was going to make sure her daughter felt the same way.

They closed the door, and Bull pulled her into his arms. “Time for a nightcap?”

“Only if it means getting naked while we’ve got twenty minutes before she tells us she heard Santa.”

“I only need ten,” Bull said.

Maddie threw back her head and laughed.

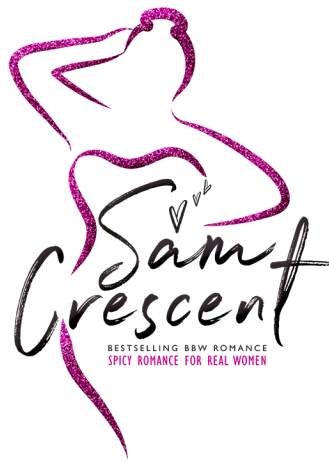
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BONUS SAMPLE CHAPTER

BRED BY THE BULLY

Breeding Season, 8

Sam Crescent and Stacey Espino

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Sample Chapter

Mira Davencourt knew he was doing this on purpose. Drake had told her to meet him at twelve o'clock on the dot. Now it was twenty minutes past. His PA kept on smiling at her, saying he'd only be a minute. She took a deep breath and flicked a blonde lock back. Her nerves were at an all-time high.

In and out, she tried to use her yoga breaths. She wasn't very good at yoga, even though she'd been doing it for nearly a year. If anything, her body was much more limber. She'd yet to lose much weight, but she wasn't one for cardio.

Why am I thinking about exercise right now?

She hated being here.

Mira hadn't seen this man in such a long time. Drake had made her life at school a complete misery.

She didn't understand why her brother would do this to her, but this was about family. Ever since their father died, Nigel had been trying to make the pawnshop pay for itself. The biggest problem was neither of them knew anything about rare goods. Nigel had invested good money into products that had absolutely no value. He took unacceptable risks. Then he had to go and get a loan from none other than Drake Eastwood. The man

who'd bullied her throughout high school, who was one of the worst men in the city to even be around.

I can do this.

She'd gone to the shop to talk to Nigel about letting the pawnshop go, only to find the place smashed up and her brother with two broken legs. If he didn't pay a large sum of money to Drake by the end of the week, his hands would be next. They'd keep breaking things until there was nothing more than his neck to snap. This had happened on Monday.

So, on Thursday at lunchtime, the only available slot Drake had, she sat waiting to talk to him. She had no idea how she was going to do this. They owned nothing of any value. The pawnshop was so deep in debt that selling it would cause them to owe even more money. Their father's legacy had turned into a hinderance.

The migraine that started the moment she found her brother had gotten worse to the point of making her sick. She couldn't stomach food. Nigel had tried to play chipper, like he was in complete control, but she knew differently. Once they finished with her brother, the debt would belong to her.

No matter what her brother tried to do to protect her, he couldn't save her.

Taking a deep breath, she tried not to think about everything that would be lost. She knew her father had loved his pawnshop, and he'd had an eye for antiques, but it had missed her. She'd moved from job to job over the past ten years. She'd been a barmaid, worked in a bakery, a travel agency, and many other places. Right now, she worked as an accountant. The hours were odd, but the money was good.

She really thought she was happy, but now her brother was taking all decisions out of her hands. No matter what she earned, she couldn't cover the six figures he owed Drake.

After forty minutes, she was tempted to leave and even stood to go, but suddenly, the door to Drake's office opened. She expected him to be alone, but out came three men, all of whom shook his hand.

On the outside, he looked like a suave businessman, but she knew the truth. Not all of his businesses were legal. Nothing could be pinned to him, but his name sent fear through everyone.

His dark-brown gaze captured hers. He tilted his head, but she didn't complain, nor did she give away her annoyance at being kept waiting.

"Miss Davencourt is here to see you," his PA said.

"Certainly. No interruptions, Glenda." He held his door open.

Do not go in there.

He's a monster.

All it took was one thought, *Nigel*, to get her moving. One step in front of the other, she entered his office, walking toward the single chair in front of his desk.

Where had the other two men sat?

"Please, take a seat, Miss Davencourt."

Did he remember her? Their school days had been a long time ago.

She watched as he rounded his desk. His suit jacket fit him snugly, showing off his broad shoulders. As he sat, the flex of his muscles gave away how strong he actually was. The man worked out. At the cuff of his jacket, she detected the merest hint of ink, but she couldn't make out what it was.

"What can I do for you?" he asked.

She clasped her hands tightly together, hating how nervous she suddenly felt. This wasn't good. Drake didn't have any control over her, not really.

"I'm here to talk about my brother."

Drake leaned back in his chair, the tips of his fingers pressed together.

"What about Nigel?"

He hadn't given any indication of knowing who she was.

"I understand he owes you a payment."

"He owes me a hell of a lot more, Mira. You know that or you wouldn't be here."

He knew her name.

"Let's cut the crap, Drake," she said.

"No formality with Mr. Eastwood?"

"What do you want?"

"On my last count, your brother owes me close to a quarter mil," he said. "We can start with that, and I'm being generous without adding interest."

She had no idea what her brother was doing with so much money. The shop wasn't even worth that. She closed her eyes as another wave of sickness washed over her.

I can do this. I'm not upset. I'm not going to give in.

"Why would you even loan him the money? What the hell did he want it for?"

"It's not my place to question the motives of my customers. I merely give them what they want and expect payment in return."

"Are you stupid?" she asked.

His brow rose.

"There's no good business sense in loaning out money to anyone who will have it. Nigel couldn't afford to pay you back."

"And you think I didn't know that?" he asked.

Mira closed her mouth and watched Drake in case he did anything. He was a snake back in high school and time hadn't stopped that viciousness from manifesting. He was even deadlier now.

Drake was rich, powerful, and feared.

She had to be careful.

"If you knew he didn't have the means to pay, why did you lend it to him?"

"Do you want a drink?" Drake asked.

"Please, you've kept me waiting. I don't want a drink."

"Business ran on longer than I'd hoped, but as usual, I got what I wanted." Drake stood and moved toward his drink cabinet in the corner.

She wanted to scream at him, but instead, she kept her calm.

"You know, everyone in this world has desires. They always want something in life that they might not be able to acquire. Some things are valuable and have a cost. I have an abundance of money, but what I want, I can honestly say cannot be bought."

"You're not making any sense."

"Actually, what I want can be bought, but I like to have my certain brand attached to it." He smiled, and it wasn't a nice smile.

"Drake, just tell me what you want. You knew Nigel was my brother. Clearly, you wanted business with me. Stop avoiding. Just tell me what you want. You know I don't want him to get hurt. Two broken legs is already too much."

“My men do know how to carry out instructions. I told them to make him hurt.” Drake took his seat once again and continued to stare at her. “You were pretty in high school, but now you’re absolutely stunning.”

Heat filled her cheeks and she licked her dry lips. Compliments were foreign to her. She pushed some of her hair off her face.

“Tell me, Mira, what are you willing to do to save your brother’s life?”

“Anything.”

“You don’t want to take a minute to think about that?” he asked.

“Drake, you don’t have any siblings, so I get that you wouldn’t understand this, but I love my brother. I’ll do whatever it means to keep him safe. What do you want?”

He didn’t answer right away.

She gritted her teeth to keep the begs and pleads inside. This was a nightmare. Nigel’s life hung in the balance. Her brother would be pissed to discover her here, fighting for him, but there was nothing he could say or do that would stop her.

Drake leaned on his elbows, smiling at her. “I want you to carry my child,” he said.

“Excuse me?” She must have misheard him.

“I want a child. An heir. You, Mira, are who I want to fuck to get that. It’s simple, I’ll wipe out all of your brother’s debts. I’ll also take the pawnshop off your hands and even make sure your brother can start a life on his own. In return, you belong to me. Your pussy is mine to fill. I want babies, and I want you to be the mother of my children.”

Drake watched Mira’s reaction. On the surface, no one would ever have suspected what she was feeling. It was all in the subtle movements, the slight pinching at the lips, the fiddling with her hands. She wasn’t happy about what he’d asked for.

Out of all the women he’d fucked over the years, Mira was still the most expressive, and he’d never once seen her naked. Their only interaction had been at school, but in those days, he’d lived for each and every confrontation. Where most women threw themselves at his feet, Mira fought him.

She was not easily taken.

Over the years, as he'd built up his empire and his reputation, he'd always come back to thinking about the one who got away.

She was outraged but contained herself.

Clever.

He could have her hurt and no one would touch him. That was the benefit of being who he was.

Tapping his fingers against his thigh, he waited. She was incredibly beautiful, and he couldn't wait to spread those juicy thighs and taste her sweet cunt. The background search he'd done on her before this meeting hadn't given too much away. He didn't know if there was another man in her life, or if anyone had even come close to winning her over. She'd worked so many different jobs that no one knew who the real Mira was.

"You're crazy," she said, getting to her feet.

"Am I?"

The moment Nigel had walked into his office asking for money, he'd seen an opportunity he couldn't turn down. The money was no doubt a bad investment, but it wasn't enough to make him lose sleep over, especially as it had achieved what he wanted. Mira in his office.

"You want me to have your children?" she asked.

"Yes." He opened up his jacket and rounded the desk so he stood closer to her. Mira may hate him, and that was fine with him, but her gaze kept on straying. She was attracted to him, and as far as he was concerned, he was more than happy with that. He wanted to fuck her, and this was years in the planning. He would have her.

She pushed her hair out of the way. The long locks could never be tamed, and he loved that she'd never gotten it cut. He couldn't wait to run his fingers through the length or have it spread out across a pillow, or better yet, wrapped around his fist as he pounded inside her.

Fucking her was going to be a pleasure. He looked forward to having his name spill from her lips.

"This is crazy."

"Or it's a lifeline. You and I both know that pawnshop isn't going to make it. Nigel went to other people for money. Only my name and my connections are keeping him alive."

"You ordered to have his legs broken."

"I still have a reputation to protect." He winked.

She grabbed her head on both sides. "Oh, God, this isn't happening."

He watched her. The pencil skirt molded to her shapely hips and ass. He'd been with slender and curvy women. None of them even compared to Mira. He couldn't wait to see what kind of treasures she held beneath.

"You said you were willing to do anything to save him."

"Not have your children. I hate you."

He smiled and closed the distance between them. She stepped back and he followed. There was no getting away from him.

When her back hit the wall, he slammed his palms at either side of her head. "You can fight me all you want, but you and I both know you're turned on by me."

"You don't know what you're talking about."

His office was a nice warm temperature and yet her nipples poked against the front of her shirt. The jacket she wore gaped open, and he knew she wanted him.

He put his fingers on her knee and slowly began to slide his hand up. She didn't stop him, and he moved until he cupped her pussy.

Her panties were soaking wet. "Do I need to go any further to prove to you just how wet you are?"

"Drake?"

"I don't believe in lying, Mira." He slid her panties aside and found her wet slit. "Look at that. Soaked."

She put her hands to his chest, but he stroked over her clit. Using his fingers, he moved up and down, preparing her, not penetrating, but getting her used to the feel. Her head fell back against the wall.

"I know what I want, Mira. I want kids, and I want you naked in my bed. Give me what I want, and your brother will be free. You'll be the one responsible for his happiness." He pressed his nose against her neck as he plundered her cunt with two fingers. She was incredibly tight.

She moaned, and the sound echoed around the room.

"I hate you."

"Do you think I care if you hate me or not? I want what I want, and I'm going to get it by any means I have to." He bit down on her neck, relishing her cries.

She started to thrust against his hand, and he groaned. He couldn't wait to replace his fingers with his cock, but for now, he just needed to give

her a hint of what it could be like.

Kissing down her neck, he didn't care that clothes were in his way. He sucked on her beaded nipple, biting down.

When he thought he had her close to the edge, he stepped back, pulling his fingers from her pussy and his mouth from her tit.

He wanted to do more. To bend her over the desk and take her hard and fast. That would come soon.

Once she agreed to belong to him, her life as she knew it would cease. There would be no room for her to be anywhere else but at his side.

He had an insatiable appetite, and he'd been anticipating claiming Mira for some time.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

He lifted his fingers to his mouth, licking them clean, tasting her. Stepping back, he kept his gaze on her.

His cock pressed against the front of his pants, and it fucking hurt. He wasn't a small man, but years of restraint and control made him sit down. "I proved a point. You want me, and I'm saying you can have me, but it comes with a price. Everything in life has a price."

"My freedom for my brother's?"

"And he's getting a lot more than others would give him, believe me. I'm being more than generous."

"You're asking me to bind myself to you for life. There's no way in hell I'd give you a child and leave it."

"Do you think I expect only one child from you?" he asked. "I want four at least." He intended to bind Mira to him in every single way.

The girl he remembered at school was just as passionate now. He had to wait, to bide his time, but he could have her. He was the one with all the power. She would have no choice but to bend to his will, and fuck if that didn't turn him on even more.

He wanted her more than anything else in the world. Being close to her only served to remind him of all that he wanted.

Clasping his fingers together, he waited as she struggled to compose herself.

She tried to close her jacket, but the wet stain he'd left from his mouth was still visible on her shirt.

"When?" she asked.

“Excuse me?”

“When do you want me to start?”

“Immediately.”

“Do I get a chance to think this over?”

“With every hour you take, the higher the debts are. Like I said, Nigel owes a hell of a lot of money.”

She rubbed at her temple and he saw how pale she looked.

He opened the top drawer of his desk, removed two pain pills, and then grabbed a bottle of water from his fridge. He offered them to her.

“What are they?” she asked.

“The legal kind of painkiller. It will help your headache.”

“How did you know?”

“I know a lot, Mira. I know you’re desperate. I know you want to find anyone else but me to save your brother. You also know that at the cost of your body and your womb, you’re going to give yourself to me.”

“You’re so sure of everything. Why didn’t you just take it?” she asked.

“There is a condition with all of this,” Drake said.

“More conditions?”

Drake smiled. “I’m a businessman.”

“Tell me,” she said.

“I expect you to be willing.”

“What?”

“You heard me. I expect you to come to my bed as a willing participant. I don’t want a corpse in my bed, and I don’t do rape. You will come to bed and play just as I will. Anything less and your brother’s life ends.” This was enough for today. He checked the time even though he didn’t have another meeting, but he needed Mira desperate.

He’d wait for an answer, but they both knew what it was going to be.

End of sample chapter

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