

BECCA LEE



A
Perfect Chance

PERFECT SERIES BOOK THREE



Chance

A PERFECT CHANCE

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Dedication

Donna, the Jo to my Ella.

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Prologue

MACE

Four Years Earlier

"Mace, get your head outta your arse and get over here, now." It took all the willpower I had not to throw my phone against the brick wall of the piece-of-shit house in front of me.

I was itching to get inside. I would have hauled my arse in there too, but going in blind was a mistake I would not be repeating. Never a-fucking-gain. At the thought of the last raid that got completely fucked, almost a year earlier, I bit back my string of curses. I'd lost her because of one move that should never have happened in the first place.

Everything had gone wrong that day resulting in a loss from which I never expected to recover. I still wasn't sure if it was bad intel, a mole in the force, or just a heap of bad luck. But my instinct debated the first two. So instead of forcing myself in, guns blazing and with no backup, I learned from my past mistake and pulled away, heading down the street, the pipes of my Harley rumbling loudly and echoing in the still evening.

Fifteen minutes later, I rode into the underground parking area and headed in the direction of the waiting car. A large figure leaned against the hood, smoking a cigarette. Switching off the engine, I removed my helmet and stood, taking the couple of strides needed to be in front of Enfield.

"Where the hell were you?"

I folded my arms across my chest and shrugged non-committally.

"Shit, Mace." He took a final drag and threw the stub to the ground, stamping it out. A flippant remark about littering and fines danced on my tongue, but I didn't need to piss Enfield off any more than he already was. "You were there again, weren't you?"

I held his gaze, unflinching against his piercing stare. After working with his team for the last four years, I knew his tells, knew when to shove and when to keep my mouth shut. The latter was the best course of action right then. I wouldn't lie to him. He knew exactly where I'd been.

He sighed, a deep sound that was loud in the enclosed space. It sounded defeated, as well as completely pissed off. "You need to stop. It's not healthy. Not right. Damn, Mace, I can't even begin to"—he lowered his

head and looked at the ground before he continued—"you know, but it has to stop. You're chasing a ghost."

Clenching my fists and my jaw at his words, I tilted my neck, feeling the satisfying crack as I released some of the tension.

"I can't." It really was that simple. I couldn't rest, couldn't stop, not until I caught all the bastards responsible and put them to ground. The thought alone filled me with exhaustion. I couldn't remember the last time over the past year when I'd slept for longer than two hours straight.

"You can and you will." Enfield took a step towards me, his tone turning hard. "You're putting your team in an impossible position. You know that, right? O'Leary keeps covering for you, but you're going to drag him down with you."

I knew he was watching out for me, but on this, I couldn't listen. When I'd finished my training and probation period for the police force, I'd been recruited into a special strike force team, targeting outlaw motorcycle gangs, or OMCGs, on the Sunshine Coast. OMCGs had been running riot in the state for the last few years, dealing in drugs, firearms, and women. We'd been battling with them ever since. Every time we were that much closer to winning, it appeared another gang was ready to merge in and take over the reins.

And these *were* gangs, criminals we needed to get off the street. When I was first recruited, I'd naïvely thought it was motorcycle clubs we were targeting. It didn't take long for me to have my eyes ripped wide open and to see the obvious differences.

There was one club, Deadwood, that I'd become particularly friendly with, despite me being a cop and all. They'd welcomed me with open arms, not only because of my sweet ride, but I'd opened up to their pres, telling him who I worked for and what I did. At the time, I half expected him to pull out a Glock and shoot my arse right then. He didn't. Much to my relief, he joined forces with me and my team, wanting to get the outlaws off the street. They were screwing things up for all the clubs, making life hard, and making the ability to ride with colours impossible.

Enfield clamped his hand on my shoulder. "You need to know I was told to report another incident if you were caught straying." He squeezed me lightly before dropping his hand, pity evident in his voice.

I shrugged. "You do what you need to do." I meant it. I didn't want O'Leary or any of my squad being affected any more by me than they

already were.

Groaning, he shook his head. "Don't be this guy, Mace. You're a good cop. You know that. You also know that Nox went down." I moved to talk, but Enfield stopped me. "Yeah, I know there were others involved, but you know how this works. You're going to get yourself fired or killed if you carry on."

He was right. We both knew it, but with what happened, even after all this time, I couldn't rest. I was exhausted, but I was on the verge of risking it all. That was something else we both knew. I was getting no closer to the truth, though. I should have shared what little intel I had, but I'd bypassed that road too many moons ago. No longer was I the good cop, the one who went by the book. While I still had a kick-arse arrest rate, my reputation was beginning to precede me, and I knew better than any that I was becoming a liability. Scrap that. I was a liability, because I no longer gave a shit.

"We done here?" I asked dismissively. There was nothing he could say that would make me stray from my mission to take down every fucker who had a part to play in the set-up, the one that destroyed my world by taking Abigail from me. I clenched my jaw, waiting for his answer.

Enfield sighed, a trait that was becoming his normal response to me. "Just keep the fuck away from Riots. Got it?"

I didn't commit to an answer. I looked at him hard, put on my helmet, nodded my goodbye, and accelerated away.

I headed out to see the Deadwoods. I needed to blow off some steam in a place where I could safely get obliterated without having to watch my back. It was no secret that the Riots had a hard-on for me and were looking for any excuse to get me out of the picture. I kept bringing the heat to their door, and even though Nox was serving time, he still had a heap of power over them. One of his plays was to make my life as difficult as possible, and the new prez, Rebel, seemed happy enough to take on that task.

Did I give a fuck? Screw that. I would take every last one of the gang members on.

Diesel, Deadwood's pres, greeted me with a chin lift when I entered the club bar and pulled a stool next to his. I still thought it comical that I'd become an honorary member of his club, but we'd earned each other's respect several times over, and I knew he was someone I could trust.

"You good?"

I reached out and took hold of the bottle of beer that was placed in front to me. "Thanks." I nodded at Julie, one of their bar staff. She winked at me before heading away. I looked at Diesel, who had angled his head in my direction. "Yeah." I lifted the bottle to my lips and took a hard pull. "Same old shit."

He didn't respond, nor did his gaze waver as he waited for me to continue.

"I think it's about time I left this shit behind." It was the first time I'd voiced the words I'd been debating over the last six months or so, even though vocalising it hit me with the sense of betrayal. While I'd been on my search for justice by taking down as many of the Riots gang as I could, I'd reached that point where there were too many eyes on me, just waiting for me to step all the way over the line. Enfield had turned a blind eye too many times to count; hell, most of my team had, but I knew the powers-that-be were waiting for me to screw up so badly the cuffs would end up on my wrists.

My words out, a heavy weight lifted off my chest, despite the internal battle going on. Maybe it was time to stop. I was far from over losing Abigail, but I'd hit so many dead ends about what went wrong that day, that I had no idea if I had the strength to continue for much longer. I was drifting into the darkness, and if I wasn't careful, I didn't know if I'd come back from it.

I rubbed a hand over my face, weary of everything. My thoughts just a short while earlier with Enfield were so different to the exhausting ones rushing through me as I sat nursing my beer.

With my relief came the onslaught of guilt. Letting go would mean letting go of her, something I'd promised myself I'd never do. *Fuck*. Everything was so screwed.

"To do what?" Diesel interrupted my thoughts. There was no judgement in his voice, no sympathy, just an honest question.

"Damned if I know." A half-hearted laugh escaped me.

Diesel squinted at me. "You wanna know what I think?"

"Sure." At that point, I was more than ready for someone to make decisions for me.

"I think you're right. You need to get out. Your concentration is worth shit; you're too focused on those bastard Riots."

I clenched my jaw, knowing he was right.

"How about going it on your own?"

I tilted my head, listening. He had my attention. "What? Like PI stuff?"

He shrugged. "I was thinking more like security. You've haven't pissed off every friend in the force, right? So you'll still have contacts should you need them. Plus, you can still do your hero shit, or whatever else your reasoning was for joining up in the first place." He snorted and took a drink. "Just work out what you gotta do, move the fuck on, and live."

I clenched my fists and made to speak, but Diesel stopped me, raising one of his hands, placating me.

"I'm not saying forget Abigail, stop loving her or any shit like that, but hell, Mace, grieve properly and start living." He stood when he'd finished speaking, placed a hand on my shoulder and squeezed. "Think about it." I nodded. "Right, I'm out of this joint. I have to go and see Lena." A shadow crossed over his face.

"How's she doing?" I asked before he left.

Diesel shook his head, anger and sadness duelling in his eyes and the clench of his jaw. "Not good, Mace, but with time, she'll get there."

I nodded my understanding. Pain and death were things I was familiar with, unfortunately. But it was a tragedy that someone as young as Lena had experienced what she had.

I watched him walk away, chatting to a few of his brothers on the way to the exit. Maybe he had it right. Security? Perhaps I could make it work.

Chapter One

MACE

Present Day

I looked down at the puke on my tee before raising my head to the sky and closing my eyes. I wasn't praying as such; rather I was regretting once more stopping by to see Liam and Jo before heading out for the evening. At the very least, I should have brought a change of clothing.

Happy gurgling caught my attention, switching my displeased frown into a smile. Opening my eyes, I looked down at the girl in my arms and grinned. She was beautiful. I'd forgive her for every puke stain as long as she kept giving me laughter and smiles. I lifted her small form into the air and blew a raspberry on her exposed stomach.

Her giggles were immediate and infectious. Damn, I loved that sound.

Jo stepped towards me with a wet wipe. "Need this?" She handed it to me.

I repositioned Abi to hold her with one arm and took the wipe gratefully. "Thanks." I wiped at the sick. Long gone were the easy-to-clean milk upchucks from a couple of months ago. Instead, I cursed the day that my sister-in-law had decided Abi was ready for solids. I had no idea what the bright orange was now staining my tee, but surely it couldn't be a good thing for my niece's system.

"She gets you every time, without fail."

I grunted in acknowledgement. "What the hell have you been feeding her?"

Jo laughed and busied herself in the kitchen, something I was still not used to. Jo was far from domesticated, but this motherhood shit suited her. Liam was a lucky bastard. "Ask your brother. He was experimenting with different veggies." She shrugged and looked at me. "Abi likes it, though. Other than when you come around and she throws up on you."

I headed to the bin, wriggling baby in my arms, and disposed of the soiled wipe. "I'm going to start making surprise visits instead. That way you can't feed her crap before I come. I'm sure you do it deliberately." I sat down at the table and placed Abi in front of me, her butt on the table while I supported her. Her big brown eyes smiled at me, right alongside her cute

grin. I was sure the kid was in on it. "You in league with your evil parents, kiddo?" I pulled a face at her, earning myself another sweet giggle.

"It's your own fault." Liam stepped into the kitchen and kissed Jo before heading over to his daughter and me. "You throw her around all the damn time. What did you expect? You're a human fairground attraction." He kissed Abi on her head and planted his hand on my shoulder, giving it a squeeze.

I huffed. "She begs me to do it."

Liam sat and raised his brows at me in amusement. "She can't speak yet."

I looked at Abi, my heart full of love for this child, and I grinned. "She doesn't need words with her Uncle Mace. Her eyes tell me everything." And they did. She was a complete mix of her parents, yet her eyes were soulful, reminding me so much of her namesake, my Abigail, whom I'd lost years earlier.

"What are you up to tonight?" Jo asked, coming to the table to join us.

"Heading out to Diesel's." After all these years, we were still good friends. I had a lot of time for the guy. He'd helped me so much over the last few years, especially when it came to starting up my own agency after I'd broken free from the force.

Pulling my gaze from Abi, I looked at Jo and caught the end of her eye-roll.

"What's that for?"

"Seriously?" she jibed.

I nodded for her to continue just as Liam spoke, "Just leave it, Jo."

My interest was piqued for sure. Jo's opinion was something I'd equally respected and dreaded over the years of her being in my family.

"I've heard about those parties, you know. Don't they have pussy on tap or something?"

If I'd been drinking, I would have spat it everywhere. Instead, I snorted and coughed out my laugh. Abi reached out while I laughed, attempting to put her fingers in my mouth. I pretended to nibble at the tips while I grinned. I glanced at Liam when he sighed. He offered me a shrug, meaning he was leaving this one to me. "Well, they have beer on tap, and a few women around the joint."

"Do they have gang bangs in the bar?"

Holy shit. The woman was hilarious. I'd have to invite her and Liam over one time. I paused that thought and immediately changed my mind. There was no chance she'd be there and not get kicked out by letting her questions run wild. "Not that I've seen. It's a good place, good people."

"So no gang bangs?" She almost sounded disappointed.

"Jo, woman, what the hell are you talking about?" Liam asked, sounding exasperated.

She bit her bottom lip and scrunched up her nose. "Well, El gave me a book to read. It was all about these bikers."

My grin stretched wide when a hint of pink crept over her cheeks. An embarrassed Jo was a rare sight. I'd savour every damn moment.

"And?" Liam prodded.

She flicked her gaze nervously between Liam and me. "Well, it was hot and full of sexy alphas, and damn, so much mind-blowing sweaty sex." It seemed she'd found her footing as she didn't pause for breath as she continued, "Well, there was a scene with a couple of bikers and a woman, and they were in the bar. And hell, everyone could see them." I threw a look at Liam, desperate to see his expression. There was never a dull moment in their house.

I held back my laugh at Liam's wide eyes, and he gulped. He cleared his throat, his voice lower than a moment earlier. "And what? That turned you on?"

Shit, while I found this whole damn thing funny as fuck, it was my cue to leave.

"Well, yeah, not that I—"

"Okay," I interrupted. "Take Abi and I'm outta here." I stood, kissed Abi's soft cheek, and placed her in front of Liam. As soon as he reached out to secure her, I let go. His eyes were still focused on his wife. "Yep, see ya." I hightailed it out of the room as quick as I could. I loved the pair of them, but the last thing I wanted was to be around them and their dodgy sex-talk foreplay crap. I shuddered.

I mounted my bike. I'd have to head home before I went to the bar. Orange sick was not a good look.

Chapter Two

LENA

I placed a beer in front of my brother and Cole and released a dramatic sigh. Their conversation froze, and Diesel looked at me expectantly.

"You got something you wanna say, Lena?"

"Well, yeah. I've been thinking—"

"Okay, I'm out." Cole snorted, but Diesel threw him a look, signalling for his butt to remain on the stool.

I shot my own glare at Cole before I continued, "So, there's this job—"

"No."

Seriously, that was it. No explanation, not even a chance for me to finish my damn sentence. "You do realise I'm a grown woman, right?" Hell, even to my own ears I cringed at the whine evident. I was an adult, yet there I was asking my overprotective asshole brother for permission to get a job. There was nothing right with this picture.

"You've got a job here. So what's the problem?" He chugged back his beer nonchalantly, not at all affected by my pissed-off stare.

I dropped my voice, leaning forward to speak. "I also have a degree in business management, yet I'm dishing out beers for a living and scrubbing down a bar."

It seemed to have an impact, but not necessarily the one I wanted. He sighed, but a flash of anger and concern crossed his face before he spoke. "Cole," he ordered. The tone was enough for Cole to stand and leave us to it. "Lena, you know I love you, and I want you to be happy, right?" He paused, waiting for me to acknowledge him. I gave him a firm nod. "You also know this is your safe space. That's why you're doing so well." I clenched my jaw, hoping desperately he wouldn't go there. "What are you going to do in a job filled with strangers in an unfamiliar place, huh?" He lifted his brow at me, pissing me off even more. "What are you going to do if you have one of your attacks?" My pissed-off stare was in danger of becoming explosive, even more so because I knew the arse was right.

In my last year at university, where I'd been studying in Melbourne, I'd witnessed shit no one should ever see. The results were not good old "simple" anxiety, if there really was such a thing. That would have been too easy. Instead, I had a type of agoraphobia. With passing years, and the help

of my brother and our extended family, I was able to live a somewhat normal life. That included completing my degree online from the safety of my brother's home in Queensland, plus I finally had a few safe places where I wouldn't collapse, literally, to the ground and cower, shake, and speak in tongues. Admittedly, it wasn't quite tongues, but the after-effects always shook me up.

Despite this, I needed more. I tried not to feel guilty about that, especially considering all Diesel had already sacrificed for me so he could give me such incredible support. I had to continue to try to be strong. And the only way to do that was to push myself. My world was narrow, and at times miserably debilitating. I was unsure how much more my mind could take.

"Let me just ask you something," he said, his voice calm. "Where's the job? Is there an interview process?"

I released a tense breath. Just the thought of heading to the solicitor's office down the road, less than one kilometre away, made me break into a sweat. Yet, I was struggling to breathe in this place. "It's at Jacobs and Sons. I have an interview tomorrow."

Diesel pursed his lips and stood. "Let's get in the car for a visit now then, yeah?"

I swallowed back the panic rising in my chest and froze, knowing and hating what he was doing.

His brows dipped and regret reflected in his eyes. Walking around the bar to me, he took me in his arms and kissed the top of my head. "I'm sorry, Lena. That's not going to work, okay?" I knew he was right and sniffed back my tears, hugging him back. "Let me see what I can do for you, though." I pulled away and looked at him. I didn't dare hope, but the thrill of excitement danced in my stomach, momentarily forcing away the unbearable anxiety.

"What do you mean?" I attempted to keep my voice steady. His smile suggested I'd failed at keeping the bubbling excitement at bay.

"Let me see how we can put that brain of yours to good use and get you out of here safely, but you know this all takes time, right? It's not something that can happen tomorrow." I nodded. "Baby steps and we'll get you where you need to be."

I launched at him and held him tight. My brother could be an arse, but he could be all kinds of wonderful, too. "Thank you," I whispered against

his chest, before pulling back and offering him a wide grin. I stepped out of his arms and watched him retreat from around the bar. The door opening drew my attention. For the second time that night, I froze, but for a wholly different reason. Mace had just walked in, and fuck, if that didn't make me want to run and hide rather than remain rigid and gawking.

He looked around the room, soaking everything in. His eyes flicked to the group of women in the corner, then to my brother who sat with Cole. They then landed on me. I held my breath as I took him in. Mace was an enigma. I couldn't help but feel the pull. He wasn't a patched-in brother. He was respected by Diesel but was far enough removed from Deadwood to offer a hint of the forbidden and safe. In truth, I loved that he wasn't an official member of the MC, not that it really mattered either way. For one, I was convinced my brother would never allow a man to look at me more than once; well, not without walking away with a shiner and a limp. I was also convinced that my brother still thought I was a virgin. While my phobia taking over my life certainly felt like it, I had previously managed to escape to uni for almost three years and lived in a world outside of my brother's protective hold.

I missed those years with an aching heart every time I thought about them. Life was so simple back then. As I took in the man who avoided my gaze when he stepped towards the bar, I wished for the time I had been whole, wished for the opportunities I'd allowed to pass me by. If I could have had a do-over, I would have ensured I took nothing for granted: the touch of a man's hand on the small of my back, the freedom of the fresh air at the beach. They were simple things, but I craved them so desperately. I just had no idea how I'd get there.

Managing to find my voice to speak to Mace so he wouldn't catch my starry-eyed look, I asked, "Beer?"

He angled his head, his deep brown eyes flicking to mine and he nodded. I grabbed a bottle from the fridge to my right and opened it, placing it before him. He waited until I released it and my hands were securely behind the bar before he nodded his thanks and picked it up. He then turned his back to me and headed towards Diesel.

Everyone in the club knew to follow certain "rules" when it came to handling me. The thought used to make me cringe as much as it made me sigh in relief, but I'd soon learned to rely upon the rules, making the bar one of my safe spaces. My time in the club's bar had become an easy place to be

as a result. Despite my desire to escape, I felt productive and relatively normal when surrounded by my biker family and the familiar stale scent of beer.

I watched Mace take a seat next to Diesel and shook my head. I knew telling Diesel that I wanted to be elsewhere was as crazy as it was challenging. Trying to re-enter the world sent icy fear through my veins, but it was the heat of possibility that I focused on.

I was ready.

Chapter Three

MACE

I'd spent more hours than I would allow myself to recall imagining what Lena's skin would feel like. When she'd placed my beer on the bar, though, I'd followed Diesel's instruction to the letter. No touching. But I longed to, and it was that thought that always confused me and made a sliver of guilt wrap around my heart.

While I hadn't been a monk since Abigail's death, I hadn't fucked every available pussy either; nor had I slept with the same woman more than once. Lena though, she tugged at desires I would have sooner left buried. Fantasising about the touch of her skin, let alone what her lips pressed against mine would be like, was all I needed to remind myself to put distance between us. So when I'd snatched up my beer, I hadn't even bothered voicing my thanks, afraid of what my voice would have sounded like. It was much better for her to think me an asshole anyway.

Retreating to the table where Cole and Diesel were, I pulled out a chair and sat. I looked between them and their curious stares as they looked at me and then each other. My body tensing, I waited not so patiently, jaw ticking, for them to tell me what the fuck was going on. Cole's grin didn't help the rise in tension. The bastard looked smug.

"I think it'll work. Just build up to it and it could be the answer you're looking for," Cole said around the fixed grin on his face.

Diesel squinted at me and then nodded, but he didn't form a smile. Instead, his eyes were hard, intense.

"You gonna tell me the fuck you're talking about?" I placed down my bottle and positioned my hands on my thighs. While the tension had eased a little, courtesy of Cole's dickish grin, they'd had a whole damn conversation, some of it without words, about me, and I needed to know what they were planning. I didn't like surprises. Hated them as much as being kicked in the nuts.

"How's business?" Diesel asked, face unreadable. "Still got a shitload on?"

I frowned, wondering where the hell this line of questioning was headed. "Yeah, it's good," I answered cautiously.

"Last time I stopped by that dump you called an office, it looked like some sort of tornado had swept through it. What's that about?"

Diesel didn't ask dumb-shit questions. This I knew. Every question he asked had a purpose, working towards a bigger picture, yet for the life of me, I had no fucking idea where he was going with it. I relaxed back in my chair a little before I answered. "Work's busy. I hate paperwork, so stuff builds." He nodded as I spoke, seeming to like my response from the tightening of his lips and the small smile playing there. "Why do you wanna know?" With Diesel, it was so much better asking for straight-up honesty. It was how he rolled.

"Gotta proposition for you." The small smile slipped from his lips, his eyes turning serious. "More of a favour I think only you can help me out with."

I knew better than to say "anything." While Diesel was not a crook, he had his moments of bending the rules to suit himself, pretty much the way I did too.

"I'm listening." There wasn't much I wouldn't do for Diesel or any of his brothers in the MC. I'd called on them more than once to have my back, and they'd always come through for me. Just a few short months ago during all the shit caused by the sperm donor I once called Dad, they had helped to protect Jo, plus I regularly called on them if I needed support on some heavier cases.

"You know trust doesn't come easy, Mace." I stilled. "But you, brother, while you don't wear our colours, are one of us. I trust you. You're probably the only one out of the club who I actually trust with my life."

I nodded, not quite sure how to respond. I respected Diesel a lot, damn, I loved him as a brother, but still I remained uneasy, waiting for the "but."

"But"—there it was—"there are few I would ever trust with my family, my sister." I forced myself to control my reaction and not look at Lena, who busied herself behind the bar. "But you, Mace, you I trust."

With his words, relief settled over me that I'd forced myself to remain neutral around Lena all this time. The reality of exactly how much Diesel paid attention to every interaction his sister had hit me. Immediately after the relief, anxiety stirred to life. "What's wrong with Lena? Why do you need someone you trust with her?"

Beyond her beautiful hazel eyes and skin that looked so goddamn soft, I only knew pockets of Lena's history, as well as the "rules." I knew she had

a phobia. She struggled to be in public and was anxious with strangers, could only handle certain types of physical contact. In the past few years I'd had conversations with her, which on the whole she'd handled fine. I'd also watched her only touch a few people, those who she was close to. In that time, I had seen her on two different occasions have an attack. Both times had left me momentarily paralysed and yearning for the ability to take away her fears. One was after a fight broke out in the bar and a newer member of the MC had grabbed her to move her out of the way. The other was when a stranger had entered the premises and she'd flipped.

Her meltdown debilitated her. She'd frozen, before rocking and shaking, only to close her eyes tightly and stumble to the ground. She'd muttered to herself the whole time. Rage had boiled in my system and I'd happily taken on the task of throwing the fuckers who were fighting out on their arses while Diesel had supported his sister—after punching Ice, the idiot who'd forgotten the no-touching rule. I had also reached the stranger at the same time as Cole during the second attack and helped to get him the fuck out of there.

As for why she suffered in the first place, I was still unsure. It was within my power to find out. Hell, it was what I did for a living, but researching her past would have meant I cared, and I couldn't afford to care, ever again. I knew that she hadn't always been that way and that when she'd been at university she'd witnessed hell. Physically, she'd come out relatively unscathed. Yet, I was living proof that damage didn't have to be done to you directly for you to suffer the devastating consequences.

"I need you to let Lena work for you, in your office. If salary's an issue, I've got you covered. She just needs out of this place before she loses it any more than she already has." My eyes widened. Before I could speak, Diesel continued, "Do you know what a big fucking deal this is? She's actually asking to leave this place, to go somewhere new. I need to make that happen for her."

I flicked my gaze to Lena, who smiled and spoke with Carrie, Cole's woman, oblivious to our conversation. Fuck. I had no idea how to handle the situation. From years of training in the police force, I'd learned to think quick, react fast. But there was nothing as my gaze focused on her beautiful fucking smile.

I remained silent, absorbing every movement on her face as she grinned, soaking in her laughter, which I didn't hear as often as I would

have liked. I coughed and turned back to both Diesel and Cole, who stared at me intently. I hoped like hell they wouldn't ask me to move, as there was no hiding my hard-on. Everything about this request screamed *bad idea*, but how could I both say no to Diesel and miss out on the opportunity to help make Lena smile every fucking day? Shit. It really was a bad idea.

"Okay." *Fuck me!* My brain-to-voice function seemed to have melted down. How the fuck would I be able to have Lena in close proximity, hell, take care of her, and still allow my carefully erected barriers to stay strong? I slammed my mouth shut, fearing I may spew some other shit that had no business being voiced.

Diesel stood, dragging me up with him and pulling me in for a bear hug. He patted me hard on the back. "I fucking owe you, man. Seriously. I fucking knew I could count on you."

I returned the gesture knowing there was no way of backing out. My eyes landed on Lena, who looked in our direction, a crooked smile on her lips. I returned her smile, quite possibly the first I'd ever thrown her way. She reacted immediately, her eyes widening a fraction before she pulled her bottom lip between her teeth. I couldn't have resisted the draw the gesture had on my gaze if I'd wanted to. It was the only mouth I'd spent time fantasizing about in years. Fuck, and doing so while in close proximity of her big, protective brother was probably not the smartest move I'd ever made.

I dragged my gaze away from her and stepped out of Diesel's grasp. He grinned widely at me, genuine relief and gratitude playing on his features. He nodded at me and indicated I should take my seat. I did so willingly, needing the solid wood under me to ground me, give me time to think through what the fuck I was going to do and how I was going to handle the situation.

"You're bloody golden, brother." He nodded at me once again, his face serious. "Let's set things in motion over the next week, work out what's to be done before I speak to Lena."

"Sure thing," I responded. "Just let me know what you need from me."

Diesel angled himself towards Cole. "Is Collins still tight with that counsellor bird?"

"Janie, yeah." Cole pulled out his phone. "You want me to set something up?"

"Yeah, get her to meet me, but not here. Let's do it at Mace's office." He looked at me, not looking for approval, just acknowledgement. I dipped my head in acceptance. "Tomorrow at 6:00 p.m. That work for you, Mace?" I nodded. "Good. Make it happen, brother," Diesel continued, once more speaking to Cole.

Cole stood and made his way out the back, phone already to his ear. Alone, I looked back at Diesel, waiting for his play. "For this to work, I need to know how best to do it." His dropped his voice lower as he continued, "Lena's seen shrinks and whatnot before. Some helped, but then she hit a roadblock and didn't seem to make any progress, you know? Thought I could ask Janie for the best way for this to work. She seems okay. There's been no need for Lena to see anyone recently, but I thought with her making this step, it's best I speak to someone in the know." He paused, seeming to wait for my response.

"To see how best to ease the transition?"

"Exactly." Diesel grinned in approval. "It's gonna push her, but she wants to be pushed. Just need to make sure it's not so fucking far that she falls." His brows dipped together, his eyes never straying from mine. "Tomorrow I'll be telling you shit about Lena. Only a few brothers know the full story, and for this to work, you need to know too." He paused before releasing a heavy breath. "I trust you, Mace, and I need you to know that I expect you to have Lena's back."

I made to speak. There was no fucking way I could be sticking around for babysitting duty. I was out too often on the job for that level of responsibility. Diesel shook his head and continued, "Not asking you to stop doing your job. I'll figure out the logistics of making sure one of mine is there for her, someone she trusts when you can't be."

"She trusts me?" I questioned. I remembered every single conversation I'd had with Lena; never could I recall there being a moment where she'd put her trust in me.

"She trusts me, and I trust you." He took a swig of his beer. "But it's more than that." His eyes tightened a fraction. "I've seen how she looks at you, mostly when you're not looking. I've seen the way she reacts to you too. Her defences don't kick in. She doesn't cower. In fact, it's the fucking opposite."

I locked my jaw tight, refusing to swallow, refusing to give him any tells that my adrenaline had spiked.

Shaking his head, Diesel looked half-bemused, half-sick. "I've also seen the way you look at her."

I stayed stoically silent, my teeth grinding, causing a dull pain to throb in my mouth. I had no idea where the fuck he was going with any of this, especially because he'd asked me to give her a job as well as fucking protect her.

"She could do worse."

What the fuck?! A broken nose, a punch in the gut, a warning to keep my hands to myself, any of those I was prepared for, but his words... I was left reeling. I hadn't even realised my mouth was gaping until Diesel pointed it out to me.

"Don't get me wrong, you fuck with her, you're a dead man." This I could relate to. I nodded in response. "But, the fact that you don't fuck around with any club pussy, hell, hardly any fucking pussy in general, matters. Plus, despite your eyes all over my baby fucking sister, not once have you even touched her, so fucking careful, respectful." He leaned back in his chair. "That, Mace, that right there is enough for me to know that you're fucking good enough. I know it, and she knows it."

I took a few moments to gather my thoughts. Diesel giving me the go-ahead and me actually acting on it were two completely different things. I voiced as much to Diesel and continued, "I honestly don't think I can ever let my guard down again, Diesel," I admitted. "It wouldn't be fair for any woman, especially not Lena. Keeping my distance is easier."

His laughter had me lifting my brows. "There's no chance of keeping your distance with Lena. I need you to help her, protect her, so you need to deal with whatever shit you've still got going on and think of another approach."

The fucker was right, but the last thing I needed in my life was another woman who had the power to bring me to my knees, or more specifically, whose death had the power to obliterate my heart and soul. Never a-fucking-gain. I ran my hand over my face, no longer caring about holding my mask in place. "Fuck. I'm totally screwed."

Diesel's laughter rang out around the bar. I picked up my bottle of beer, and he clinked his against it. "That you are, brother, that you are." He winked and took a deep pull of his beer.

Chapter Four

LENA

Nerves bubbled through my veins, settled in my stomach, and left me feeling like I was going to puke... or pee. Hell, there was a level of excitement there too that made me want to fist pump and do a girlie squeal. I could not for the life of me remember the last time I had squealed in excited anticipation.

Mace.

Holy cocking hell! I was going to be working for hot-as-hell moody and mysterious Mace.

The last thing I wanted was to be falling for a guy connected to my brother, not that Diesel would allow me the freedom to pursue such a thing, and of course, Mace had made it pretty damn clear he wasn't interested in me. Strike that, in any woman. And that was fine by me. Or at least, that was what I tried to convince myself.

I eagerly allowed my thoughts to be consumed by all things Mace. It was easier to be thinking about him, imagining what he would look like naked, what his lips would feel like. It was all so much easier than focusing on the bigger, terrifying reality of having a new job, in a new place, with new people.

I wanted it all. I'd begged my brother for his support, and he'd made it happen. When he'd told me he'd try to sort something, it had left me with a glimmer of hope, but I also wasn't expecting him to come through for me, or at least not so soon. He'd made it happen. My amazing, pig-headed, bloody brilliant, pain-in-the-arse brother was the best.

And the need to puke was back.

I breathed in deeply through my nose and held it for six seconds before breathing out. "Relax," I said aloud. I did this twice more, in and out in a six-second cycle, all in the desperate hope of regulating my breathing and eradicating my desire to vomit.

"You okay?"

I paused at five on my third loop of counting and flicked my gaze to Diesel. I hadn't realised we'd parked. Diesel sat in the driver seat with his body angled towards me. I nodded at him and smiled, hoping it didn't come out as a grimace.

"You've got this."

I loved him even more for not just offering me an out and giving me the chance to turn back. It would be too easy to accept such an offer.

I swallowed, a new, real smile forming. I sat up fully and turned towards him after unclipping my seat belt, ignoring my shaky hands. "I've got this," I repeated. We had made the journey together to Mace's office fourteen times before. Eight times I'd actually got out of the car and walked to the front door; only twice had I gripped Diesel, leaving my fingernail imprints behind. It was finally time to enter my new place of work. I knew Mace and Janie were inside. I also had seen photographs and video footage of each room in the building. That was all Janie's idea, to help me familiarise myself with the layout and the look.

We'd been doing this exercise over the last three weeks. During that time, I'd met with Janie, who was quickly becoming a good friend and someone I could rely on, and I'd also met with Mace and a couple of the guys he contracted in for security work regularly. Each meeting with Mace left me breathless but surprisingly at ease. For all his gruffness, he was a calm soul. I'd said as much to Diesel, who'd laughed his arse off and said he'd let Mace know. I threatened him with an array of colourful threats if he made good on that.

Mace had talked me through his job, my role, the office layout, and a whole heap of details. I'd hung on every word, sort of. Admittedly, I found it far too easy to concentrate on his lips as he spoke, only occasionally getting distracted by thoughts of their softness. Each time, he'd clear his throat, no doubt seeing my zoned-out expression.

He'd also started to touch me. I'd noticed it immediately. Hell, how could I not? The first time his hand had connected with my forearm, I'd jumped, but not for the reason he'd thought. I'd seen his pained look before he'd schooled his features, but the jump was a reaction to the zap of electricity that had buzzed through me at our connection. His palm had left heat in its wake and stirred to life a hive of activity in my belly, one that made me catch my breath and pray that he'd touch me again. He didn't that day. But with every meeting, he'd touch me more regularly. I'd begun to anticipate it in nervous excitement, trying carefully to control my reaction in fear that Mace would misread my reaction and avoid the contact.

While nobody had discussed every step of my transition into Mace's world, like his physical contact, I was savvy enough to know every word

and touch were controlled. Mace filled that role easily. Apart from my brother, I'd never met another man who was as self-controlled as he, and that said a hell of a lot, considering my Deadwood family. He was the master of restraint. There hadn't been even a handful of times in the many years I'd known him where he'd dropped his guard. I couldn't help but wonder if I'd ever get to meet the real Mace.

Placing my hand on the door handle, I turned away from Diesel to see Mace striding towards the vehicle. My heart picked up speed, my eyes widening when I saw the determination in his. The door opened before I had the chance to do it myself and his hand appeared in the open doorway. I expected to hesitate, but before I realised what I'd actually done, I was staring at my palm sitting securely in his. Rightness settled through me, calming me. I stepped out of the car as his hand tightened around my own. My eyes reconnected with his and I smiled. He offered a rare grin back, momentarily taking my breath away. His usually stoic face brightened and his cheeks dimpled just a fraction.

Damn, I was in serious trouble. With a smile like that, I had no idea how I'd keep my vajayjay in my panties. I shook the thoughts from my head, becoming aware that I was standing still, hand in his and staring at him. The last thing I needed, or my brother needed, was for me to get involved with someone as complicated as Mace. I knew some of Mace's story, his history, and it was heartbreaking. He was everything that I wasn't looking for.

Admittedly, he was a fine specimen of man, so perhaps "everything" was pushing it, but I had my own emotional crap and a head full of shit to deal with. Mace was drowning in his own darkness. I knew it so well that it was impossible not to recognise. If I delved deeper, I may find a kindred spirit. I knew enough about my own sanity to know that he wouldn't be healthy for me. I was too broken and trying desperately to repair myself. There was no room in my life for more pain.

Despite the onslaught of sensibility, my hand remained firmly connected to his. Without a word, he tugged lightly and ushered me towards his office. I barely registered the driver door opening and closing, and footfalls following us closely. Nor did I falter when I crossed over the threshold hand in hand with Mace.

I took in my surroundings. Warmth pressed against my palm and travelled up my arm, maintaining my quiet mind. There was nothing out of

place from the footage or photographs, and I found myself grinning when I looked at what was to be my desk, complete with stacked paperwork that teetered on the edge of collapse.

Mace led me through to his office space, and I reached out and touched different items and pieces of furniture as I passed; his chair, his desk, the computer screen. I paused when I came across a frame on his desk I didn't recognise.

Mace stopped and reached around me, his hand not releasing mine. He picked up the frame. "This is Abi, my beautiful niece." I didn't need to look at him to know he wore a smile of affection. The warmth in his voice was pure and real. I glanced up at him anyway, unable to pass up the opportunity to see another smile. I wasn't disappointed.

Looking between the frame and me, he handed me the photo. Mace held a cute baby girl, not more than a few months old. She was fast asleep, her cheek resting against his shoulder. Mace was peering down at her, his lips pressed reverently against her head. If there was ever a photograph that was able to capture a moment of love, this was it. It blew my reaction to his smile out of the water. That precious image showed me something I wouldn't have thought I would ever witness with Mace. He was at peace. There was no haunted look visible, no stress tightening his eyes.

"It's beautiful," I whispered. "You're beautiful." I froze, realising what had fallen from my mouth. Before I had the chance to screw it up any more and feebly attempt to backtrack, Diesel called out to us from the reception area.

"You guys good in there?"

I hadn't even realised Diesel wasn't in the same room as us. A double whammy of relief hit me. He hadn't heard my mouth fart, plus he gave me a reason to ignore my blunder and head out of the room. I placed the frame on Mace's desk and released his hand, heading for the safety of my brother. While I felt the loss of our connection, my humiliation drove me forward.

Diesel looked at me closely and lifted a brow. I offered a tight smile. "What's wrong?" he asked. I knew my cheeks burned brightly.

"Just excited," I covered, "and surprisingly not overwhelmed." I spoke the truth, my smile loosening and lips tipping fully and honestly. I looked at Janie when she stepped towards me, her grin mirroring my own. Her plan to help ease my way into this role had surprised the hell out of me. It was working. I wrapped her in a hug. "Thank you," I whispered. I wasn't cured.

There was no magic fix, but being able to stand tall, not collapsing and panicking even after my verbal diarrhoea was a huge win.

Hugging me back, Janie kissed my cheek before stepping back. "How about you take a seat in your chair at your new desk? We'll step outside while Mace heads into his office. How do you feel about fifteen minutes to familiarise yourself with your space?"

I nodded. I could do fifteen minutes. This space would be another safe place. I was determined to make it work. "Okay." I nodded.

Janie ushered a hesitant Diesel out the front door after I offered him a reassuring smile. I made my way to my desk and sat down, taking a few deep breaths as I did so. Becoming aware of a presence, I looked up at Mace's open doorway to find him hovering there, looking uncertain.

"Erm." He brushed his fingers through his hair and my gaze followed the movement. I was so easily distracted by this man. "So I'll just be in here, right?"

I pulled my bottom lip between my teeth, not sure I could trust my voice not to give my lusty thoughts or even my excitement away. I nodded.

His gaze flicked to my mouth before landing once more on my own. "Right. Okay." Hell, his nervousness was something new. "You remember what to do if you need me?"

Work questions, I could do this. Yanked out of my dirty thoughts, I answered, "Zero on the phone, silent alarm under my desk to my right, a shoulder width away,"—I reached down to check, my fingers brushing lightly over the smooth plastic panic alarm—"or if all else fails, holler."

"Right. So I'll leave my door open. It's rare that it's closed. It'll also help you to get used to the different noises."

My eyes widened. Mace really had thought about everything it seemed. I knew he'd met with Janie, but so far he'd handled everything with such thoughtful precision and knowledge that I couldn't help but wonder if he'd done a heap of research himself on how best to handle a woman like me. My heart melted a little more.

"Thank you, Mace." I pushed all the sincerity I could into those three words. There were very few people in this world who would go above and beyond to help a virtual stranger to cope. While he and Diesel were tight, he had no real allegiance to the club. He wasn't a pledged member of the Deadwood MC. I couldn't help but wonder why he was helping me in the first place, but it wasn't the time to ask.

He nodded, offered me a quirk of his lips, and disappeared into his office.

Once alone, I looked around. I could handle this space. I then looked at the mountain of paperwork and almost happy danced. I would be so busy over the coming weeks organising Mace's dishevelled office, there would be no room for distraction or time to allow me to overthink my situation, and when I'd finally got on top of everything, I was convinced I would be in a good place. It was perfect. I owed my brother, and Mace, big for this. I'd find a way to make it up to both of them.

The fifteen minutes whizzed by phenomenally fast. I'd only just finished opening and closing every drawer in my desk and then the filing cabinet when Janie and Diesel re-entered. The chime before they opened the door alerted me to their presence, something Mace had had fitted so I would never be startled by someone entering the reception. He'd also had a Perspex divider fitted in front of my desk, something similar to what you'd find in a bank, ensuring I had physical distance between myself and everyone who entered. Between the three of them, they'd made sure I was as comfortable as I could possibly be. As I mulled over such while watching them enter, a pang of guilt hit me. Diesel was the only blood family I had left, and while we loved each other fiercely, I couldn't help but feel regret for how my anxiety impacted on his life.

Over the years, he'd rarely dated. He put that down to being too busy in the club and running their multiple businesses, but I knew that wasn't the whole truth. So much of his spare time was spent with me, ensuring I was okay. It left little room for a relationship. I was aware of three dates my anxiety had wrecked for him. There could have been more, but he'd never admit to it.

"Don't." Diesel's deep voice startled me. It was firm.

I swallowed back my emotion. He knew me so damn well, knew the guilt I battled with constantly. It was time to beat this once and for all. I'd been in survival mode since it happened and had become far too comfortable accepting my current existence as my reality and my future. I would no longer accept that, and this job was the beginning. I would no longer allow my guilt or my anxiety to swallow me whole. I was ready to fight, to take the fuckers by the balls and take control of my own life.

Mace's presence drew my attention to him. "Okay," I answered Diesel, despite my focus on the hot hulk of man filling the doorway. "I've got this."

When Mace threw me a wink, I didn't even try to keep the smirk from my lips. *I've got this.*

Chapter Five

MACE

Fucking Marshall McKenny was a sneaky bastard. Ever since the mess surrounding my dad trying to go after Jo and Liam, I'd been trying to put together enough ammo to take McKenny down. Since everything about McKenny was totally personal, I spent energy investigating him between paid jobs. For months, he'd given me the runaround, yet since just before Jo and Liam's crash, he'd sensibly lain low.

I used every contact I had, Enfield especially, my old boss still on the force, to help with intel, but he had come up with nothing recently.

While McKenny was still very much around running his legit architect business, all of his links to meth had gone quiet. With no traceable evidence, Enfield had suggested I back off and move on, but that wasn't like me at all. Hell, even after the years since Abigail's death, I was still waiting for Nox's release. I didn't stop or give up easily. With Nox, I knew that once I had him in my grasp, I may finally get the truth about how the bust went so fucked-up, and exactly who screwed us over. While chasing Riots was no longer what got me through my day, I still had them in my sights. Enfield and Diesel knew this. As long as I wasn't stirring shit up like I did while still on the force, they pretty much left me to it. It was an unspoken agreement we had.

I looked at the list of recent council applications that McKenny had submitted. Everything seemed above board, but there was that *something* that I just couldn't put my finger on. I was missing a piece to the McKenny puzzle and while I couldn't yet see it, when I did uncover it, I had a gut feeling it would be the first piece needed to build my case to take the fucker down once and for all.

I heard her soft steps before I saw her and immediately lifted my gaze to the open doorway. Lena approached my office, greeting me with a gentle smile. I knew I grinned back like a lovesick douche, but even after a month of Lena working for me and offering me the same perfect smile, I never got tired of seeing it.

"Coffee?" she asked.

"In or out?" I raised a brow in challenge. It was something I was trying, gentle pushes to ease her out of her comfort zone, and so far, it

seemed to be working. After a month, I knew her tells and could usually prevent an attack from happening. It wasn't smooth sailing; far from it. It was stressful as hell, but fuck, when she smiled and achieved a small win, it was worth it all. There had been just two attacks when I'd been out of the office, but both times, true to plan, Kid had been around looking out for her.

Kid was part of Deadwood and had had my back too many times to count. He was also tight with Lena and had worked a few security gigs for me when I needed him. It had taken a few months a couple of years back for me to swallow the jealousy as I observed the two of them together, dissecting and figuring out what their relationship was. He was one of the few Lena could comfortably touch. Even two years ago, I was envious that she would kiss his cheek, or he would hold her tightly in a hug. It took a while, but I was able to work out that they had a brother-sister kind of love. They were close to the same age and had actually gone to high school together.

Admittedly, it was only after I worked this out that I took a liking to Kid, but ever since, he was a guy I trusted almost as much as I did Diesel.

Lena's small smile grew into a wide grin. "Out." She added an affirmative nod and took a deep breath.

Standing, I grabbed my wallet, phone, and keys, and the two of us headed out. I locked up behind us, and we held hands to my car. The contact was the same every single fucking time. I'd hoped to get used to it over the last month, not to react so obviously like the twat that I was, but no such luck. Her delicate hand in mine felt fucking perfect. A calming rightness settled through me, filling my chest with emotion and my cock with need. Yet still, I remained stoic, steadfast, not daring to break her trust, not risking pushing her over to the point of panic. If I were ever responsible for that, fuck knows what I would do. So instead, we held hands, walked to my car, which I'd taken to using rather than my wheels for this purpose alone, and I saw her safely situated in the passenger seat.

As I headed to the driver side, I thought of Diesel's words, his roundabout way of giving me permission to form a relationship with Lena. The knowledge still screwed with my brain. I was so tempted, too fucking tempted, to steam ahead and make it happen, but I couldn't do that to her. My head was too consumed with what ifs while my heart was buried in guilt. So instead, I helped her and supported her the best I could, hoping like hell I didn't mess it up and lose myself in the process.

I pulled out and drove to our local drive-through coffee house. I'd never paid attention to the place before, but soon discovered it was bloody perfect for Lena. She didn't need to get out of the car—though we were working up to that—yet she had the freedom of leaving the office and doing something everyday people did.

It didn't take long before we arrived. Unbuckling her belt, Lena leaned over me to speak into the microphone to make her order. I held back my groan as I inhaled her scent: fresh peaches that smelled fucking delectable. I couldn't help but wonder if I'd spent the first week messing up her order on purpose, to give me the opportunity to have her all but sprawled over my lap. I was a sadistic bastard if that were the case, punishing myself by revelling in the closeness, but not allowing myself to touch.

She made her order and then turned her head to look at me, her brows raised in question. I held my breath at her closeness. All I had to do was lean in a couple of inches, if that, and my lips could be pressed against hers.

"Mace?" Her voice reminded me that she was waiting for my order.

"Peaches." *Fuck.*

She grinned at me, still in close proximity, her arm brushing against my chest and her other hand moving to my thigh for support. "Excuse me?"

Thinking fast, I said, "Peach smoothie?" not intending for it to come out as a dumb-arse question.

"Alrighty," she said with a laugh, turning her head away from me and leaning closer once more to the open window. The movement caused her hair to sway, releasing more of the peach scent that apparently left me incapable of thought.

Before I could stop myself, I leaned forward, my nose touching her hair. It wasn't until her hand shifted a fraction, tightening on my thigh, that I realised what I'd done, or that Lena had noticed. I froze, not daring to move. In the past two minutes, I'd grown a fucking vagina. Sniffing her goddamn hair and enjoying the smell of peaches. *Pussy-whipped, yet I'm not even getting any.*

Lena eased her head back, angling it to face me. I dared not move, hoping her hand wouldn't shift to feel my hardened cock, while wondering how the hell I would handle it if I saw panic on her face.

When her face finally turned to mine, I gritted my teeth. The agony in my cock at her closeness was too much. Her sweet breath brushed against my lips. Unable to put it off any longer, I allowed my gaze to travel to her

eyes. They were focused on my lips. *Fuck*. I gulped, my mouth dry. The action flicked her gaze from my mouth to my eyes.

I remained still, silent as I tried to read the situation. She wasn't freaking out, closing in on herself, nor was she backing away in either embarrassment or amusement. Instead, she remained in front of me, eyes locked on my own. Waiting. Waiting? I had no fucking idea if that was right. I didn't trust my ability to read people anymore, especially not a smoking-hot woman sprawled over me. My cock seemed to be the only part of me with a real reaction. It throbbed beneath my denim. I wanted to shift but didn't want to break whatever the hell this was.

My eyes widened when her gaze once more flicked to my mouth. I mirrored her action and looked at hers, and groaned when I watched her pull her bottom lip between her teeth. "Lena—" I began, but was cut off by the ringing of my phone.

She jerked back, her hand shifting off my leg and landing on my throbbing cock in the process. I half groaned, half moaned at the contact.

"Shit!" she squeaked, moving her hand quickly before scrambling awkwardly to her seat. Her gaze immediately went to her window, and she stared out intently.

Her gaze off me, I shifted in my seat, pulling my phone out of my pocket. I allowed my hand to rub my aching dick for a nanosecond, and then eased the car forward to the next window to pay for and collect our drinks.

I looked at the screen before answering the phone. "Diesel," I greeted, noticing Lena stiffen in my periphery. I schooled my voice, pushing back the effect of my pounding heart and throbbing cock. Hell, speaking to Diesel was enough to quell the latter.

"You getting coffee?" he asked.

I wasn't even surprised he knew where we were. "Yeah. What's up?"

"I have a big fucking ask, brother." His voice was serious, heavy, and I could imagine him rubbing his hand over his face in frustration.

"Name it."

"I need Lena to stay with you for a couple of days." I stiffened, my eyes widening and jaw snapping shut at the request, but he was already continuing. "Shit, man. I have to get out of town, plus there's a fuckload of shit going on around here."

"I'm not sure that's wise," I answered, not wanting to alert Lena to the fact we were talking about her.

I heard faint mumbling in the background and a door slamming shut. "I know. Fuck. It's Riots." I froze. "She's not safe at the compound or our house. She needs to be with you." He sighed heavily. "Listen, I know she's never been to your place before, and that's likely to be a huge-arse problem, but she knows and trusts you. Just talk her through it. I wouldn't put her through this if there were any other way."

Damn, I knew without a doubt he spoke the truth. He also knew that anything involving Riots, I wanted to know. "Can you tell me what's happening?" I risked a glance in Lena's direction. She'd since overcome any embarrassment she may have had and was staring at me openly.

My eyes remained trained on hers as Diesel spoke. "They've pulled some shit out of town and are making all kinds of threats. Usually, I'd ignore their bullshit, especially since it's not in our patch, but Drifters have reached out to us for help. That's something we can't refuse. There's nothing immediate you need to know or worry about, and I'm not saying that to shut you up. Anything I find out, I'll tell you about when we get back, right, brother?"

I turned my gaze away from Lena's intense scrutiny. "Sure thing." The Drifters, an MC two towns over, were tight with the Deadwoods. I knew, just like Diesel did, they wouldn't reach out if they didn't have to. While I was eager for more information, I let it rest, knowing Diesel would make good on his word.

He released a sigh of relief. "Thanks, Mace, seriously. Stop by the house to pick up some of her things first. Also, grab her medication in case she needs it."

"I didn't think—"

"She hasn't been taking any medication for the past six weeks. She's been coping so fucking well, but if this pushes her over, she'll need it to help calm her, okay?"

I nodded into the phone and answered, "Okay." Shit, I couldn't screw this up with Lena. Every time an attack hit her, it took everything I had in me to keep my shit together. I hated it. Hated feeling out of control. Hated watching her in pain. And fucking hated not being able to take her in my arms to make it all go away for her. Considering the impact on me, I could only begin to imagine how hard it hit her.

"Thanks. I have to head out. Let me quickly speak to Lena. I think it's best I tell her what's going on."

I faced Lena once more and held out my phone to her. She lifted her brows in confusion as she took it from me. I finally registered the horn blowing in the background and the repetitive call of, "Sir, your order?" I pulled out my card and pressed it against the payWave reader before taking Lena's coffee and a sickly looking frozen concoction from the kid serving. *Fucking peaches.*

Placing the drinks in the cup holders, I pulled away and headed to a parking space. I needed to deal with whatever fallout came from Lena finding out about her sleeping arrangements.

Putting the car in Park, I allowed the engine to idle as I angled to look at Lena. Her head was down, phone to her ear, and she was slowly nodding. I smiled slightly, knowing I regularly did the same thing when on the phone. A whispered, "Okay, love you and stay safe," alerted me to her ending the call. I waited as she pulled the phone from her ear and pressed End.

I watched Lena carefully as she took a deep breath, held it, and then released it slowly. She did this a couple more times before she handed me my phone and looked at me.

Her eyes were wide, bright, and for the life of me I could not figure out what the hell she was thinking.

Chapter Six

LENA

Heat rose in my chest, rising up my neck and across my cheeks. I had no idea if it was the beginning of a panic attack or from hearing I'd be staying at Mace's house, sleeping there, for a couple of nights at least. Considering my thoughts were relatively clear, I assumed it was the latter, or, at least, hoped it was the latter since the last thing I wanted was to break down.

I'd been doing so well over the last few weeks, with only a few minor attacks. I'd even stopped taking my antidepressants, much to Janie's chagrin. I'd explained to her, even though she was just a friend and not my therapist, that while they'd helped me manage in the past, I'd been slowly weaning myself off them. I'd met with my doctor several months back and told him my plan to wean off, and he was supportive of that as long as I started work on my behaviour therapy again. So I did. But this time, it was on my terms, my own plan, with some friendly help from Janie, even though she tried to set me up with an appointment with her colleague. At my refusal, she'd promised to watch out for me as a friend, making it clear that because of our relationship she couldn't counsel me. I grabbed the opportunity with eagerness, and readily accepted any support she could give me.

Over the years, I'd had many therapy sessions. They'd worked really well at the time and had helped me to get to the point I was currently at. I knew I was stubborn, but after years of therapy and meds, I finally felt as though I was taking control of my actions and my responses to situations. I was far from magically healed, but my desire for complete control trumped all other logic. I would try. That was all I could do at this point. If I failed, then I would go to Plan B: back to the professionals.

Knowing I was headed to Mace's, an unknown place, spiked my adrenaline. There was no time to ease me into it gradually. Instead, I'd need to find an alternative way to deal with my increasingly rapid heartbeat and shortness of breath. I took deep calming mouthfuls of air, aware that Mace had collected our coffees and moved the car. When I heard movement, I finally looked at him.

Concern dipped his brows low. Gone was the usual confidence. Instead, his eyes roamed my face, no doubt looking for some sort of sign as

to how I was handling it all.

"Okay," I answered the unspoken question. "I can do this." I nodded. "Right?" My hesitant second-guessing was palpable in the small space.

Mace offered me a small smile, his hands reaching out to clasp mine. Grounded by the contact, specifically *his* contact, I nodded again, this time a small smile lifting my lips. He looked at me while I gathered my thoughts and emotions, held back from interrupting me so I could handle it my way. I still wasn't quite sure how that would be, but a firmer sense of resolve formed in my chest.

"I can do this," I repeated, this time ensuring I didn't tack on any uncertainty.

Raising his hand, he smoothed a stray piece of hair away from my face. When the pad of his thumb caressed my cheek, I closed my eyes at the contact and released a sigh. Grounded. That was what this man did for me. I had no bloody idea what the hell was in his touch, but somehow his skin against mine, hell, any form of contact worked. Every time, without fail, I found myself leaning into the moment, absorbing it, soaking it all in.

When his thumb brushed across my bottom lip, my eyes burst open in surprise. It was different, intimate, the first time he'd instigated any such contact. My stomach flipped and my breath hitched. I fought with the desire to latch on to his thumb and suck it into my mouth.

Before I succumbed, he pulled away. I gulped audibly at the loss and offered a tentative smile when I soaked up his wide-eyed surprise.

Clearing his throat, Mace gave me a firm nod and turned in his seat before pulling out and heading in the direction of my house, which I shared with my brother. It was a damn long, painful drive for the short ten minutes that it took. I was aware of every slight movement he made and every breath. It wasn't lost on me that his gaze was hard, his stare stoic as he refused to even glance in my direction. I just wondered how the hell I was going to survive my time alone with Mace. The thought left me grinning internally. Maybe if I was so focused on Mace, it would be enough for me to deal with the unexpected situation I'd found myself in.

Only time could tell.

#####

I stared at myself in the unfamiliar bathroom mirror while brushing my teeth. Rather than the pale skin that usually went hand in hand with entering a new space or tackling the unknown, my cheeks were pink, and my eyes

were bright. I spat my toothpaste out and grinned. I was so fucking proud of myself. Like seriously damn proud.

After collecting some of my things to take to Mace's, he then spoke to me the entire journey to his place. He'd handed me his phone before we'd set off from mine and given me permission to scroll through his photographs. Confused, I did as he asked. Immediately I'd gasped and looked at him in awe. His jaw had been ticking and he'd had a hard grip on the steering wheel. When he didn't look my way, I'd refocussed on the images before me. They were of his house. It seemed every room was there, from different angles. He'd done this for me. "How?" I was at a loss for words.

Over the few years that I'd known him, Mace had remained pretty much elusive. Most saw the hard and distant version of Mace; that wasn't lost on me, but I saw so much more, and it was gestures like this that blew my mind.

His voice was low and deep when he spoke. "I wanted to be prepared. I took them as soon as the decision was made for you to work for me." Still, he didn't look my way when my focus once more flicked to him.

"Thank you," I whispered, catching myself before my voice broke with gratitude.

Once more, he'd offered an abrupt nod, eyes still fixed on the road ahead. After a minute of quiet while I'd looked through the images, he'd continued to speak, talking me through the journey and his home, his routines.

Drying off my mouth before I headed to the kitchen for a glass of water, I realised that gratitude didn't even scratch the surface. Mace had constantly gone above and beyond what anyone should do for a friend, let alone an employee. I had no idea what that meant exactly. I thought back to when I'd ordered our drinks. There had been a moment there when I'd thought for sure he was going to kiss the crap out of me. The thought thrilled me as much as it scared me.

The reality was, I hadn't kissed a guy since uni, and while I was speeding towards the need to throw myself at Mace and ask him to take me hard, screw the consequences, a part of me dreaded that with the contact, I may be thrown into memories I'd sooner forget.

I shook off the direction of my thoughts, unwilling to become melancholy when things were finally looking up. I glanced down at my

chest and made sure my PJ top was straight and concealed everything it should. The material was dark but thin, though high enough that it covered my cleavage. I inhaled deeply before stepping out of the bathroom and switching off the light behind me. The sooner I got to bed and away from the temptation of Mace, the better.

That didn't seem to be as easy as I'd envisioned. Mace stood in the kitchen, beer in hand, leaning against the counter. He wore a tee that showed his bunched muscles and his ink. I found it impossible to pull my eyes away from his skin immediately. My gaze drifted down to his jean-clad legs and landed on his bare feet. Shit, his feet were sexy framed by denim, as well as big. A small movement as he shifted brought my eyes abruptly to his. I needed to get a hold of myself, and eye-fucking Mace wasn't exactly conducive to keeping my distance.

I offered a small smile, hoping the heat flushing my cheeks was my imagination and that my embarrassment wasn't on full display for him to see. Our eyes connected for a moment before his roamed over my body. My traitorous nipples hardened under his scrutiny, and I had no doubt whatsoever that they stood proudly and on display for his inspection. Forcing my feet to work, I headed to the sink, just to the right of where he stood. I picked up the glass that sat on the drainer and filled it with water. I sipped some immediately, using it as a distraction as well as adding moisture to my dry mouth.

I cleared my throat quietly. "I'm ready for bed." I then looked at him and watched as he turned his head and gazed down at me.

"Okay." His eyes were dark and intense. I turned and faced him, waiting for his support. Immediately, he reached out and took my free hand in his and brought it between us. I closed my eyes at the contact, a flicker of relief registering and spreading through me. Tightening his hand around mine a fraction, he spoke. "Come on then, Lena." My eyes sprang open, a smile already on my lips as I gazed up at him.

I nodded and allowed him to lead me to what would be my room. It was opposite his. Once inside, Mace released my hand and hovered in the doorway. He seemed momentarily uncertain. It didn't last long though before his mask reappeared.

"You good?"

I looked around the room again. "Yes, thanks." I wasn't quite sure if my response was a lie or not. On one hand, I felt surprisingly at ease, but

once he left, I had no idea how I'd react.

"Okay." Mace offered me a smile and pulled the door to as he retreated.

"Mace!" I called. The door opened. "Can you leave it open, please?"

"Sure thing." He ensured the door was fully open before moving to his own bedroom door. With his hand on the handle and me hovering near my bed, he turned to look at me. "Night, Lena."

He stepped inside and went to close his door. My heart constricted. "Mace!" I called, my voice pitched high and seeming crazy loud in the quiet house. His head popped back around the door, a frown marring his handsome features. "Erm, do you mind...?" I eyed his door, mortified at my request and unable to voice my words fully.

"No problem." He pushed his door wide open and retreated in his room.

I quickly slid under the sheets and couldn't help but lift my head off the pillow and peek. Through my open doorway, I watched Mace, his back to me, remove his T-shirt. His thick muscles bunched at the movement, rippling under coloured ink. I was too far away to see the intricate detail, but from this distance, I saw a large dragon wrapped around a stunning woman. It was beautiful. My eyes continued to roam down his back, and I realised the ink went lower, disappearing below the jeans that clung to his arse like a second skin.

He stepped out of sight for a moment before returning, this time sans jeans and just wearing black boxer briefs. I all but swallowed my tongue as I took my fill and quickly slammed my head back on my pillow before he caught me. It was going to be a hell of a few days if this was my reaction every time I saw a sliver of skin. As I drifted to sleep, a mantra of "bad idea" ran in a loop through my mind.

I sit at the table by myself, the hustle and bustle of the busy café rushing around me. After agreeing to meet Malcolm and Julie at their favourite coffee haunt in the city for our cramming session, I'm relieved I've arrived early and snagged a table. I rarely hit this part of the city; it's too far from campus to be convenient, but as it's close to Julie's apartment, I agreed.

Two men walk in. Usually, I wouldn't even notice, but I raise my brows at their heavy clothing. While Melbourne is known for its four seasons in a

day, a coat in the middle of March, especially when it's at least twenty-nine degrees Celsius outside, seems overzealous. As the two guys head towards the counter, one makes eye contact with me and smiles. He's cute, so I offer a tentative smile in return before turning my gaze back to my phone.

Then all hell breaks loose.

I clamp my hand over my mouth, holding back my scream. If I scream, I'm dead. I can't pull my eyes away from the young boy sprawled on the ground, not five metres away from where I'm cowering. He's not moving, and his eyes are open. The scream threatens again, but I can hear movement and know if I make a noise, I'll be found.

From the depths of my stomach, I find the courage to peep around the table that's on its side. I know there's a restroom next to me. I have to make it there. Get away from the chaos. Seeing my opportunity as the two armed men walk to the other side of the room, I take my chance. It has to be now. I duck inside the room, and open a stall door, locking it behind me and clambering onto the seat. I perch on top, my trembling fist in my mouth to ease my sobs.

Loud shots echo around the room outside, making me jump, but it's the screams that stab through me. All I can do is wait and hope I'm safe. Wait and hope I'm rescued.

I have no idea how long I've been hiding. Amidst the horror in the café, I dropped my phone. Burying my head against my knees, I try to steady my breathing. It's working until the creaking of the door alerts me that I'm not alone.

I hold my breath and press both hands against my closed mouth. Wide-eyed, I stare at the door and jump when the stall door beside me slams open. Heart stuttering, palms sweating, I know I'm not getting out of here.

Thud. My locked door shakes at the contact, and I can't suppress the sob from breaking free.

"Pretty girl, is that you?"

Tears flow down my cheeks as I hold on to my legs and remain as still as possible.

"You sure have a pretty smile. Want to let me in?"

Oh, God! The door bangs again, this time harder, louder. Again, and I watch in horror as a screw dislodges. My heart is about to burst out of my ribcage, but I can't move. I gasp for breath, not realising I've been holding

it. I should be escaping, looking for a way out, but my limbs are frozen, unwilling to move.

Another bang; this time the door slams open.

My scream followed me out of my dream. I cut it off abruptly, immediately remembering where I was. Sitting up, I covered my face with my sweaty palms and reminded myself to breathe. There were some days when I reminded myself to do that a lot. I'd never known something as simple, as natural, as taking a breath could be so damn fucking hard. Inhale. Exhale. As simple as fucking breathing. A humourless laugh escaped me, filling the bedroom. The false smile fell when I remembered the last point of my dream. *My memory.*

Some nights I slept peacefully. Some nights I even found it in me to have good dreams, but others were play-by-plays of that day. There were times that the details altered, though. I'd wake up at different moments. It could be when the first shot hit the young guy making coffee. Other times it was when blood splattered in my face. Or the moment in the bathroom stall.

I tended to wake up at that scream, though, not ignorant to the fact that the scream was virtually identical to the one from that day. Rarely did the dream, the nightmare, take me past that point. Only occasionally did I relive the cold steel of the gun pressed against my forehead, or the blade cutting through my top, slicing my skin. At times, it ended once I heard footsteps charging into the room, shouts from the police, my saviours, to finally experience once more the dead body of the man at my feet.

It didn't really matter either way. I'd never forget. It wouldn't matter how much I healed. How can the bodies of eighteen people ever be erased from my mind?

They couldn't.

The slam of a door and the pounding of feet down the hallway left me clutching my damp sheets to my chest. I didn't dare move or scoot further away from the door. Instead, I waited.

"Lena?"

Mace. I exhaled deeply and inhaled much-needed oxygen. *Breathe.*

He appeared in the open doorway fully dressed. Without hesitating, he headed into the room and knelt by my side.

"I heard you scream." Reaching out, he brushed strands of hair away from my face and cupped my cheek. I leaned into the touch and relaxed a little. "I'm sorry I didn't get to you sooner. Did you have a bad dream?"

I nodded against his hand.

"What do you need?" Mace's eyes roamed my face, the pad of his thumb sweeping against my skin.

"To breathe." The words tumbled out of my mouth unbidden.

He stared at me a moment, his hand pausing its soothing caress. He hesitated, just a flicker appearing in his eyes before he stood and pulled off his boots. He then walked around the bed and climbed on, scooting over until he was next to me.

"Come here." His tone was soft and warm. When I looked into his eyes, understanding shone back at me.

I readjusted myself and welcomed his comfort as I settled in his arms against his chest. I brushed my face against the cotton of his T-shirt, getting comfortable. "What time is it?" I asked.

"About four."

I tilted my head back to look at him. "Why are you up?"

At my question, he glanced down at me. After a pause, he answered, "I couldn't sleep, so I grabbed a drink and sat out on the deck."

I waited for more, but he didn't expand. Nodding, I looked away from his face and got myself comfortable, enjoying the steady beat of his heart against my cheek. Mace wrapped an arm around me, securing me to him. A ghost of a smile appeared on my lips, and I put all of my energy into absorbing the moment. It was a much better alternative than remembering the past.

Chapter Seven

MACE

There was no way in hell I could sleep with Lena pressed up against me. I was used to my own nightmare startling me awake, so waking at 3:00 a.m. was the norm. Usually, I'd be able to get maybe an hour at five, before dragging my arse outta bed for work. That was not happening, though.

Not only was I trapped beneath her warm body, but I was also caught up in remembering her scream. I'd heard it all the way from the deck. The sound had chilled my veins, all but stilling my heart. It also had made me move so goddamn fast back into the house that I wasn't quite sure if the wall had survived its impact with the door I'd slammed open.

Her breaths were steady. Not that the knowledge made me relax. Instead, I was aware of every sound, every slight movement, and fuck, when her leg clamped over mine and then, about half an hour later, lifted up to rest just below my cock, brushing against it in the process, hell, I had no fucking control over the damn erection I was sporting.

The sun was finally up, but there was no chance I was moving. The last thing I wanted was to wake her after the night she'd had. I wondered if her nightmares were about the attack in Melbourne and if they played out the same every time and every night.

I glanced down at her. She looked so damn young, and far too innocent to be in my arms. But I also knew better. Diesel had told me how close she'd come to being killed, that she'd even had a gun aimed at her head, and came away with a scar on her chest. I gritted my teeth, looking away, and prevented myself from dragging her even closer into my arms.

Loss and scumbags: those were two areas of my life that I wished I knew nothing about. Instead, I felt the gripping pain of loss daily. It weighed heavily in my soul, while the other, the scumbags of this world, I actively sought out.

A breathy sigh pulled my attention back to Lena. She shifted, virtually lying on top of me, her knee brushing against me once more. The contact was firmer, dragging a groan from my lips. I held still, hoping I didn't wake her, though knowing I really should try to escape from beneath her.

For the first time in years, the desire for something more, something intangible, became more urgent. And all of it revolved around the woman

asleep in my arms.

Another sigh escaped her lips and her hand moved up from my chest to the juncture between my shoulder and neck. Her head snuggled in closer to me, her face angling slightly so her warm breath brushed over my skin. She was a goddamn siren, every sigh calling to me, drawing me closer to risking something I had no right to risk in the first place.

I knew when she woke. With the new position of her head, I couldn't see her face, but her breathing changed and her muscles became rigid. Remaining still and breathing steadily, I waited for her to react. No amount of homework on anxiety had prepared me for this. Lena shifted her leg slightly, rubbing against my hard cock. I grunted, and she immediately pulled back, looking at me in alarm.

"Shit, erm... I'm so sorry."

With her leg no longer against my dick, I was able to breathe again. I offered a light smile and a small shrug. "It's all good. You needed to sleep."

She moved her hand and brushed it against her mouth before sighing lightly in apparent relief. I quirked my brow.

An awkward laugh escaped her lips. "Just checking for drool."

I barked out an unexpected laugh. It was not what I was expecting to come out of her mouth at all. This woman was full of damn surprises. "No drool," I said with a grin.

Her small smile stretched into a full grin. "That's a relief. The last thing I needed was to drool on a hot guy." Her eyes widened, and I was sure mine mirrored hers. A sexy blush spread across her cheeks, and she cleared her throat. "So, erm..." She cleared it again. "What time is it?"

It pained me as much as I celebrated her change in subject. Anything less would be treading on dangerous ground. I glanced at the clock. "Just gone seven thirty." Looking back at her, I noticed her embarrassment had calmed, and she seemed less vulnerable. "There's no rush. It's Saturday." I had no fucking idea what the day of the week had to do with anything. Usually I was at the office anyway on a Saturday. It was a day I could actually get stuck into work without the distraction Lena presented.

It wasn't that she was a hindrance. Hell, she'd already gotten me organised and smoothed over new gigs with ease. Her working for me made my life a damn sight easier, but that didn't mean every time I heard her move around the reception, or I caught a glance of her, that I didn't get lost

in the thought of burying my face between her thighs. This made Saturday easier to get work that required my full focus done.

Shit, it's Saturday. The implication hit me. "So," I ventured, my eyes following her as she sat up in the bed next to me and crossed her legs. I fought to keep my eyes from roaming over her form. "What do you usually do on a weekend?"

Her eyes snapped to mine and then she shrugged. "I just hang out really. Maybe watch a movie. Read. Sometimes I head to the clubhouse if some of the girls are there."

I nodded as she spoke. Over the last few weeks, her confidence with me had grown exponentially. Yet every time her gaze hit mine, it was still like the damn first time all over again. I was bowled over by how goddamn hot she was. *Fuck it.* She was beautiful. Who was I kidding to presume any less?

"Well, the clubhouse is out of the question until Diesel gives the all-clear."

She nodded her understanding. "What do you do?"

"I head to the office usually," I admitted.

A frown creased her brow. "Why?"

I could hardly tell her the damn truth. "Just to get shit done."

She still looked confused when she asked, "But there's nothing major going on, right? Nothing you don't get done during the week?"

I couldn't lie to her. It was hard enough keeping my feelings towards her hidden away as it was. "There are no distractions if I'm there by myself."

Understanding flashed across her face. Her eyes widened and a light flush spread across her cheeks. "I'm sorry."

I had no idea what she was apologising for. "For what?"

"That you have to look out for me. I didn't realise I was stopping you doing your job." I watched her gulp and a look I didn't like seeing flashed in her eyes. Vulnerability. "I can talk to Diesel about working back at the club. Shit, I'm sorry." Before I even had time to react, she clambered out of bed and raced across to the bathroom.

I remained on my arse, bewildered, before I surged into action. "Fuck!" I headed to the bathroom, my hand hovering over the door handle. I leaned in close to listen. A soft sob hit my ears, throwing me into action. Relief filtered through me that she hadn't thought to lock it. My eyes then

met hers in the mirror. Even with pink tinges around her eyes and tears staining her cheeks, she was stunning.

I stepped towards her, her eyes tracking my movement. Standing behind her, I reached out, eyes connected to hers, and then turned her to face me. I pulled Lena against my chest, wrapping my arms around her. I sighed and rested my chin on top of her head when her palms pressed against my back.

"I don't want you anywhere but by my side." I knew the double meaning behind those words, but fuck, Lena upset and vulnerable just about unravelled me. "You got me?"

I felt her nod against my chest, yet still she said, "But—"

"But nothing."

"But you said I was distract—"

"Fuck, Lena." She froze in my arms, her muscles becoming taut. "Everything about you is a goddamn distraction, but I can't *not* see you every fucking workday. You're a good distraction. Too fucking good."

I allowed Lena to angle herself away from me, her hands still on my back. I closed my eyes briefly, avoiding looking at myself in the mirror and needing a moment to prepare myself for looking down at her.

"Mace."

My eyes sprang open, and I tilted my head down immediately to look at her. My name on her lips had been whispered on a sigh. Her gaze hit mine, her deep browns staring at me with a need I had no right to.

"Kiss me."

I barely had time to register her breathy, tentative request before she raised herself towards me, wrapped her arms around my neck, and pulled my lips to meet hers.

I was lost.

Gone.

Left utterly adrift.

The kiss, her lips against my own, shifted my world. Need slammed into me, all thoughts of resistance, of denying myself the goodness of Lena, torn apart and cast aside.

I hauled her up into my arms, grabbing her arse, lifting her and securing her legs around my waist. I stepped forward so her backside perched on the sink, not breaking free from our kiss.

I ghosted my tongue against her lips, and she opened to me willingly, her tongue sweeping against mine. I groaned at the contact and squeezed her thighs, pushing my cock against the thin material covering her pussy. She gasped at the touch and rubbed herself against me, stretching her legs wider, giving me full access.

A small part of my brain told me to stop, to pull away, to protect her not fuck her. I shut it down. It was too late. I needed to be buried deep inside her as much as I needed the air in my lungs. Fuck the consequences.

I moved one hand and wrapped it around the back of her neck, drawing her closer. My other hand roamed to one of her tits, and I stroked across her nipple. It puckered instantly, and she pushed against my hand.

Lena was so fucking receptive, my control splintered completely. My hand shot down to the thin fabric of her sleep shorts, manoeuvred past the elastic, and my fingers pressed against her pussy. I broke the kiss with a groan when my fingers touched the wet heat between her legs. I stared into her eyes when I slid the first finger inside her, needing to know she wanted this as much as I did. Her eyes stayed glued to mine, and I fucking loved what I saw. Need, desire, and no hesitation.

Lena bit her bottom lip when I inserted a second finger and worked her pussy.

"Do you want this?" I needed to know. Fuck, even if her words, her voice, threatened to push me over the edge before I even entered her, I needed them so fucking badly.

She nodded and her eyes fluttered closed. She then raised her hips, pushing against my fingers.

"Lena, open your eyes and tell me you want this, want me inside you."

Her eyes sprung open, and she gasped when I worked my fingers in a come-hither motion, brushing against her wet walls and feeling her pulsing already.

"Mace, I need you to fuck me."

This woman blew my mind. It was not what I'd expected from her sweet mouth.

"Hard," she added and rocked against my fingers.

"Fuck, woman." I kissed her hard, thrusting my tongue into her mouth, my fingers pumping inside her. I needed to get her to my room before I took her bare. Reluctantly, I pulled my fingers away from her; she groaned my

name and squealed when I lifted her back up and strode out of the bathroom straight to my bedroom.

Placing her on the bed, I caressed her breasts before lowering my hands to her shorts and pulling them down. She lifted her hips eagerly. "And your top," I directed, reaching out to my bedside table, pulling open the drawer and removing a condom.

She tugged off her top as I made quick work of my clothes. Once naked, I ripped open the packet and held back my groan when she swiftly removed the condom from me, grabbed my throbbing cock, and deftly positioned the latex over my dick.

"Next time, I want that in my mouth first."

My eyes widened in surprise before I hauled her to me and repositioned her on the bed before pressing my mouth against hers and slamming into her. We both broke free from the kiss with a gasp and a moan. Lena was fucking perfect. Her dirty mouth, her heat wrapped around my cock, her breast in my hand, fucking perfect.

I raised my hips to gain access to her clit. There was no way I was going to last. With one arm pressed against the side of her, taking my weight, I used the other to find her clit. I found it easily. It was swollen in her excitement; a few flicks and I'd have her screaming. I rubbed her clit, pinching softly as we moved against each other. Lena kept in time. I attempted to hold in my groan, but then she circled her hips, making my cock twitch and throb impossibly hard. "Fuck me!" I all but gasped, stroking over her clit more rigorously and ploughing into her harder.

Pressure built at the base of my spine and my balls tightened. "Fuck, Lena, come for me." I increased the pressure against her swollen bud, imagining how next time I would enjoy tasting her and making her come in my mouth. Lena drew in a sharp breath at the increased pressure. If I could have smiled, I would have. It seemed she enjoyed a rough, strong touch.

I kept my eyes open and stared at her face. She seemed to be fighting her release. "Lena," I grunted. Her eyes connected with mine. "Let go, baby."

Lena cried out. "Almost. I don't want it to stop, please."

Her plea was desperate, but it was no use, my orgasm was too close.

I gritted my teeth, determination to make sure she spiralled into oblivion before I chased my own need driving me. I shifted to my knees, still deep inside her, lifting her legs into the air. Her ankles rested against

my shoulders. I grabbed her thigh, my other hand still working her clit, as I drove into her hard, lifting her hips with each thrust. I was deep, so perfectly deep.

Unable to hold back, I pinched Lena's clit, and she screamed. Her pussy pulsated around my cock while I gripped her hips with both hands and slammed into her even harder. I let go, succumbing to the need to fill her and then stilling as my orgasm hit. Lena's name sprang free unbidden. A claim. A desire for her to be mine. I had no idea if I was able to fully open myself up to a woman again, but it seemed Lena had made that decision for me. An intense need to fuck Lena every day for the rest of my life consumed me. Buried inside her, I swept a tendril of hair from her face, half anticipating her panic to kick in. When Lena smiled and brushed a kiss against my palm, all thought of anxiety fled.

Lena was mine.

Chapter Eight

LENA

I lay cradled in Mace's arms, barely believing what had just happened. I couldn't lie to myself and say that the two of us together had been the furthest thing from my mind. I'd fantasised about him so often, that would have been impossible. But when I'd escaped to the bathroom, trying to hide my tears because I thought I was screwing things up for him and I'd have to leave, the last thing I expected was to pounce on the dude, demanding a kiss and all but ordering him to fuck me.

My cheeks burned at the memory of my inner slut that came out to party with Mace.

Mace stroked his finger softly against my skin. I edged back so I could look at him. Damn, he was so freakin' hot. I could happily soak up the sexiness of him and bask in it all day. Throw in the mind-blowing orgasm he'd given me, and I could last a lifetime in a happy glow.

"What are you thinking?"

With his hands caressing my warm cheeks, it didn't take a genius to realise he'd noticed my blush. "Just thinking about us and what happened," I admitted. He raised a brow, indicating I should continue. I didn't miss the worry appearing on his usually schooled features. "I've never done that before." Mace froze, eyes widening in panic. "No," I reassured on a laugh. "I've had sex before." While a glimmer of relief appeared on his face, it also darkened at my admission. I fought back an eye-roll. "I meant been so demanding. Told a man what I wanted." It was difficult maintaining eye contact with him. Not only was his focus intently on me, but embarrassment crawled across my skin.

"You were fucking perfect." He shifted and leaned in to kiss me. I sighed against his lips, sure that I'd have to start pinching myself at some point. He pulled away all too soon. "Always tell me what you want, what you need. It was hot."

I latched on to the word "always", not daring to hope that it would mean this could happen again between us. I'd never known Mace with a woman before. I'd heard there'd been a few over the years, but not many, and never twice. It was damn hard to keep a secret in the club for long.

He was still gazing down at me, and I realised I hadn't responded. I'd been staring in wide-eyed wonder at him. I cleared my throat. "Okay." When he smiled at me, my own mouth formed a wide grin. A smiling Mace was so hot. I reached out and stroked his bottom lip with the pad of my thumb. "You should smile more often."

He caught my hand in his and pulled my palm to his mouth, placing a light kiss on my sensitive skin. "Keep giving me something to smile about and I'll see what I can do."

Biting my bottom lip to hold back the grin that threatened to be so damn wide I was sure I'd look like a dork, I nodded.

"What?" he asked.

I shook my head at him and a lightness I hadn't experienced in such a long time settled in my chest. Over the last few weeks, I'd finally been feeling more like my old self. I was gaining more independence, more confidence. I laughed and joked more. And while I took ownership of that, knowing it was my own resolve and fierce determination that had got me to this point, Mace also had a big part to play in my healing.

Flipping me on my back, Mace gently pinned my hands above my head as he settled between my legs. "What?" he repeated.

Unable to contain my smile any longer, I let it spread easily across my face to the point of hurting my cheeks. "I just..." I hesitated, not sure how much to reveal. Taking the chance, I continued, "You, this, us. It took me by surprise." His eyes remained steady, waiting for more. "Don't get me wrong, I've thought about it a lot. And by a lot, I mean since I first met you." It seemed I was revealing all my secrets. While a flicker of anxiety at my honesty came to life in my stomach, I was no longer the naïve girl from when I was at uni. Too many years and nightmares had passed for that. With the decision to be the woman I wanted to be firming my resolve, my voice strengthened. "I wanted this to happen, and I want it to continue to happen, Mace."

Sure, this "new" version of me was raising her awesome head, but that didn't stop me from waiting anxiously for him to respond and wondering if I'd pushed a little too far. I tried and failed to not remind myself that everything I knew about Mace included his being methodically distant since I'd known him, and it most definitely did not include relationships.

His eyes roamed my face, his expression serious. "I don't know if I can be who you need me to be."

I swallowed and then tentatively touched his cheek. "But you're you. Why would I need you to be anyone else?"

His eyes widened at my words before he tilted his head slightly. He was considering something. I wasn't quite sure what that was yet. I just hoped it didn't result in me being mortified.

Determination crossed his features, a combination of his jaw tightening and his eyes softening. Mace leaned down and pressed his lips against mine once more. Our lips moved together lightly, with a tenderness that I did not expect. Pulling away before the kiss had time to build up, he looked down at me again. "I want this to happen too. I want you in my bed every night."

Damn, that was one hell of a statement.

A thrill of excitement rushed through me. I could never imagine Mace saying something he didn't mean, or something he wouldn't make happen. "I like that idea."

He grinned widely and planted another kiss on my mouth. This time, there'd be no pulling away. I was determined to celebrate our new relationship with Mace buried deep inside me.

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Mace had brought brunch to bed. We'd since devoured it, and each other again, and were talking. We were wrapped up in each other, my body half-sprawled over him, while sort of watching the movie that played on the screen.

It was an easy decision to stay in bed for the day. Not only did it allow us the time to get to know each other better, but with the threat of Riots up in the air, there wasn't really another place for us to go. When Diesel had spoken to me the previous day, he'd shared enough for me to understand two things: stay with Mace and stay inside.

Knowing Diesel was out doing who the hell knew what filled me with dread. It always did. But he'd always come home to me, to protect me, and I had to believe he would continue to do so until I could do those things for myself. It wasn't the time to worry about him or doubt him.

Plain and simple, he was a hard-arse. Long before he'd become president of the club, the illegal elements had been cleaned up and cast aside. Well, mostly. Sometimes the guys were a law unto themselves, but only if they were forced to step up. Considering the evil I knew existed in the world, I was more than okay with that.

The whisper-soft stroke of Mace's fingers against the scar on my chest made me smile. There was a time when even the look of it, touch of it, damn, the thought of it had sent me into a panic attack. It had taken a heap of therapy and support for me to embrace the scar as a part of who I was. But it didn't define me. The same couldn't be said so much about my agoraphobia, but I was working my arse off to make it the case.

"Diesel told me the full story about this." Mace continued to caress my scar.

I nodded. "I know. I told him he could."

He pressed his lips against my head. "You're one of the strongest women I know."

I snorted. "Hardly. I was lucky." I shook my head, seriousness filling my words when I continued, "Considering I was in the wrong place at the wrong time, I was lucky enough to be in the right place. You know?" He remained silent. "If I'd chosen a different seat. If I hadn't hidden away." I gulped, my next words weighing heavily. "If I hadn't even smiled at that fucking murderer... I wouldn't be here. That's not strong."

I believed every word. I wasn't looking for an ego boost or even an affirmation that I was brave. I wasn't. I'd run and hid. I honestly believed if I hadn't smiled at the guy when he'd entered the coffee shop, he wouldn't have come looking for me. He certainly wouldn't have spoken to me, touched me, cut me. By doing that, he gave the police time to save me. That tentative smile in its own weird way had helped save my life. That and the cop who'd put a bullet through his brain.

Mace continued his ministrations across my chest. "Do you not think surviving shows your strength?" It was my turn to remain silent. "Many wouldn't have had the strength to run and hide. Most would have been too terrified and stayed put. More than that, you've come out the other side."

My unattractive snort burst free again. "I'd hardly call panic attacks and jumping between a few safe places coming out the other side."

"Do you honestly believe that?"

The truth was I wasn't 100 percent sure anymore. The last thing I wanted was to discredit what I'd been through or belittle it even. Too many people had died that day for me to do that. And while I had improved and was reaching normalcy every day, I wasn't there yet. Maybe that was what I was frustrated by.

"No, I don't," I admitted. "I am lucky, though."

"Yes, you are," he agreed.

"And I appreciate it so much that I survived, that I'm here. How could I not?" I huffed out a breath. "Perhaps I'm stronger than I give myself credit for, but I can't help but feel as though I should... hell, I don't even know. All those people died. I think I owe it to them all to remember that day." A tear escaped, quickly followed by more. "Why should I get to be so lucky? Fuck. Do I sound like a martyr? That's the last thing I want. It's just all so confusing." I'd shared similar thoughts to past psychiatrists and counsellors, even some to Diesel, but never anyone else. Just a few bloody hours into our relationship and I was pouring out my soul. I was amazed he wasn't packing my bag and dumping my arse on the club steps.

"I think it'll always be confusing. How can you make sense of what happened? You can't. Nobody can. Terrorism, in any shape and form, is beyond our comprehension." He placed another kiss on my head, and his lips remained close to my hair when he continued, "All you can do is live, take a chance on life. Hell, own it. Don't let it own you. Because you're smiling, moving on, it doesn't mean you have to let go of what happened, that you're ignoring it. You'll never forget, but you can start to recall the memory with strength."

I listened attentively, sniffing through tears that were free-falling down my cheeks.

"Own the memory and allow it to help shape you into the person you want to be. That's how you honour the lives lost. That's how you show your gratitude. It's also how you show the motherfuckers who tried to break you that you won."

He turned me in his arms so my face rested on his bare chest. He held me close until my tears ran dry. I was so close to achieving it all. The thought registered and then buzzed through me, relighting the hope that had previously been a tiny flicker on a wick. The spark grew until light reappeared.

I leant up, gazing in wonder at Mace. Twice now he'd created the spark I'd been struggling with for so long. My eyes roamed his face, absorbing the laughter lines around his mouth. I was sure they hadn't been used enough recently. I settled my gaze on his eyes. He peered at me in earnest, as if urging me to have faith and belief in myself. I smiled, my skin tight from my dried tears. "Thank you."

His eyes warmed, his taut body relaxing around mine. "Anytime, baby."

I relaxed back on his chest and enjoyed the slowing beat of his heart. Mace was the king of the poker face when it suited him, but his once fast heart rate that had now slowed to a normal pace was enough for me to know that he was affected by what we'd shared.

Content, I pressed a kiss against his chest. My lips twitched when his muscles bunched. I made to do it again but was interrupted by a loud banging on the front door. A moment later, I heard a key fumbling in the lock. I froze, my breaths coming heavy.

Immediately, Mace sprang into action, but instead of diving for clothes or the door, ready to attack, he shifted me around and cupped my face in his large palms.

"Breathe, Lena. Count and breathe." My eyes glued to his, I did as instructed, remembering to count, remembering to hold, and finally exhaling. Fuzziness had threatened my vision, but already it was clearing. Mace had my full focus.

The door opening and closing made me jump. The only thing stopping me from darting out of bed and finding someplace to hide was Mace's apologetic face. It piqued my interest enough to stop me from hyperventilating.

"I need to apologise. She has a habit of doing this." He reached out and grabbed his T-shirt from the side of the bed. "Here, put this on." Footsteps made their way through to what I thought was the kitchen.

"Mace. Holy crap, I need to pee. Mace!" a woman hollered, seemingly distressed and in need of the bathroom.

Mace groaned and planted a kiss on my lips. "You stay here and then I'll come back and explain everything, okay?" I nodded. "It's Jo, my sister-in-law. She has a habit of stopping by unannounced and bringing me meals to put in my freezer."

I grinned at that.

"It's not bloody funny. She's not even that great a cook." He jumped off the bed, grabbed a pair of shorts and stepped into them before he threw me a smile. He then headed out of the room, closing the door behind him.

After a few moments, I heard running feet, a door slam, followed by the flushing of the toilet a short while later. I relaxed a little. I'd discovered Jo was Mace's younger brother's wife. I'd never met Liam, but I'd already

heard stories of what Mace and Liam had got up to in their youth. I'd heard stories about Jo too. Knowing she was family to Mace calmed my racing pulse. While she was a stranger to me, Mace loved Liam and his family. It made the thought of meeting her easier to swallow.

The door creaked open, drawing my gaze. Mace stood in the open doorway carrying a child. My heart warmed, pulling an easy smile from my lips.

"This is Abi," Mace said, stepping towards me. I climbed off the bed and stood, Mace's tee hitting me midhigh. "Say hi to Lena, Abi." His lips pressed against her cheek and he blew a small raspberry against it, causing her to release a beautiful giggle.

"Hi, Abi." Lifting my hand, I gave a small wave.

Still smiling, she looked over at me and made a combination of cute sounds before she wriggled in his arms. Mace placed her on the floor and walked around her to stand next to me. It was funny how a baby didn't bring forth anxiety. Their innocence was too wonderfully pure for that.

"You good?"

I looked up at him and grinned. "Yep. She's beautiful."

A little squeal drew our attention back to Abi, who'd manoeuvred off her bum and proceeded to do a crab-like crawl towards us.

"Holy shit! She's crawling." Mace moved to sit on the floor and I joined him. I didn't know who to keep my eyes on: a mesmerised Mace or the grinning baby giggling in delight as she made the cutest and most bizarre crawl towards us that I'd ever seen before.

"Knock, knock," a woman's voice came from the open doorway. Immediately, Mace took my hand in his and squeezed reassuringly. "Is it okay if I come in?"

I looked up at the woman standing in the doorway. A friendly smile and bright eyes greeted me. Warmth surrounded this woman. I could immediately understand why Mace loved her like a sister. She raised her brows towards me, making me realise she was waiting for permission.

I may have melted a little at the gesture. It could only mean Mace had spoken to her about me.

"Lena, right? I'm Jo. I see you've already met Abi." Her eyes flicked to her daughter, who'd made her way to her Uncle Mace, pulled herself to her feet, and latched on to him. She was bouncing delightedly up and down on his outstretched legs.

I looked at Mace, expecting his focus to be on his niece. Instead, his gaze roamed my face, waiting for my reaction. He pulled my hand, still clasped in his, to his lips and kissed it.

My melting moment turned into something so much more extreme. This man was dangerously perfect.

Glancing back at Jo, who remained patiently waiting, I offered her a genuine smile. "Yep, I'm Lena. Come and tell us about your beautiful daughter crawling. It's a new development?"

Jo grinned, stepped into the room, and sat on the floor before us. "Yes. Isn't she amazing? But bloody hell, she moves so damn fast."

Mace's hand in mine loosened a little, and I knew he'd relaxed just as I had.

"What's with the crab-leg thingie?" Mace asked. I watched in amusement as Abi grabbed his hair and tugged him towards her. She opened her mouth, attempting to clamp it around his nose.

I laughed at the antics. This was a completely different side of Mace, one I imagined only his family ever saw. Butterflies broke free in my stomach, happiness pooling in my chest that I was lucky enough to see him this way.

"She started a few days ago. If you'd been by, you would have known." I watched their exchange, amused at Jo lifting her brow in challenge.

Frowning at her, Mace harrumphed.

She ignored him and continued, "She's so bleeding fast. I swear she could enter some sort of crawling competition or something."

"But why's her leg doing that?"

I wasn't quite sure if he was simply bemused or genuinely concerned.

"Don't you bloody start. Liam freaked out too. It's normal and adorable. Back me up, Lena."

I nodded in agreement. "It is pretty cute."

"So she doesn't need those braces like Forrest Gump had then or anything?"

I couldn't hold back the snort from escaping when I realised he was deadly serious.

He turned at my reaction. "What?" I simply shook my head at him but quickly laughed when Jo leaned forward and smacked him around the head.

"You're such a jerk, Mace." She stood, picking up Abi as she did so. "Come on. I'll put the kettle on." She eyed my clothing and grinned.

"Perhaps you want to freshen up too." Her smile grew wider as my face heated. She left the room, closing the door behind her and leaving me to groan in embarrassment.

Mace laughed as he stood, pulling me up with him. "What?" He looked down at me, a relaxed smile on his lips.

"Great first impression for meeting your family." I gestured to my lack of clothing.

"You look hot." Tugging me into his arms, Mace lowered his head and kissed me, his hands settling on my arse and pulling me tightly against him.

Reluctantly I removed myself from him, too aware of his sister-in-law in the next room. "I don't think Jo's interested in me being hot, Mace."

"She'll love you. I'm sure she's already halfway there."

I stepped around him, ready to leave the room and dash to the spare room to grab my clothes. "I'd hardly go that far," I replied.

"Babe." I turned and looked at him, my hand resting on the door handle. "Trust me, yeah?"

Sighing, there was nothing I could do but agree and hope he was right. I nodded and opened the door.

"And, Lena." I gazed over my shoulder at him, watching his bright smile transform his face into something sinfully handsome. "You did great. I'm proud of you."

A grin appeared on my face and tears sprang to my eyes. I took the compliment and headed to make myself presentable, allowing myself to revel in the small victory of meeting someone new, without warning, and most importantly, keeping my shit together.

I may have even done a small fist pump and booty dance when the bedroom door closed.

Chapter Nine

MACE

"So...?"

I hadn't even taken a full step into the kitchen before the questioning began. Not that I was surprised. Jo was not known for keeping her thoughts to herself.

When I'd first headed out to see her after she'd dashed into my home, all but thrown Abi into my arms, and then peed, I'd had the briefest of moments to explain that Lena was here and remind her of Lena's phobia. I'd already shared a bit with both Liam and Jo over the past few weeks, just in case they met. It meant that she knew enough to tread carefully.

Her trailed-off question was no doubt in relation to Lena being half-dressed in my T-shirt, and in my bedroom. I hadn't shared my feelings with either Jo or my brother. Seemed like the cat was out of the bag.

I walked straight past her and pulled mugs out from the cabinet to make the coffee, studiously avoiding eye contact. Not that I expected it to make the slightest bit of difference.

"Something you've been holding back, Mace?" I didn't even need to look at her to know she wore a shit-eating grin.

I headed for the storage cupboard and pulled out the high chair for Abi, just one of the many pieces of child paraphernalia I kept around the place. I set it up, took Abi from Jo, and strapped my niece in the seat. After I planted a kiss on her head, I retrieved a few toys for her.

"Stop bloody ignoring me. She's going to be out any second, and you know I'll keep this up with her here unless you give me something."

I sighed, knowing she wasn't kidding. "It's new."

"How new?"

"As in last night, new."

"Holy shit, really?"

I nodded.

"So has this been building between the two of you?" she asked while her head was in the fridge, slightly muffled by her moving the out-of-date crap in there around.

"Since the day I met her," I admitted, surprising myself.

A thud followed by a groaned, "Fuck," came from the fridge. Jo pulled herself away, rubbing her head and looking hard at me.

I snorted. "Need an ice pack?"

She scowled. "No, I bloody don't. Arse." She stepped towards me, her fridge tidying forgotten. "What do you mean since you met her? How long have you known her?"

I gave a one-shoulder shrug. "A few years." Shit, I sounded like a fucking pussy.

"And you've chosen now to do something about it?" She shook her head at me; I couldn't quite work out if it was in wonder or jest. "Why?"

I turned my back to her and made our coffees, giving myself time to think. There was no real answer to her question. It wasn't planned. Despite that, she was a temptation, one last night I could no longer ignore. "Things just changed last night."

"What about her... illness?" Trust Jo to say it as it was.

I looked over my shoulder at her and frowned. "She's not ill." I shook my head. "She went through a whole heap of shit, and she's finally dealing with it."

I finished the coffee and handed Jo hers then placed mine and Lena's on the table before sitting.

Sitting opposite me, Jo reached out and touched my hand. I raised my head and looked at her smiling face. "This is good. She seems great. You need a bit of sunshine in your life, honey."

Quirking my brow at her, I couldn't hold back my eye-roll. "Sunshine? Really?"

"Hey"—she flicked my arm—"you know what I mean. Unicorns that fart rainbows, mind-blowing oral sex, tit rubs, and smiles." She grinned, knowing full well that her words would make me look at her in disgust. I promptly did so.

"Please, Jo, do me a favour and never say shit like that to me again." I shook my head. "That shit just ain't right."

Laughing loudly, Jo looked far too pleased with herself and her ability to make me squirm. Once her laughter died down, she sobered, looking at me in earnest. "But she's making you happy, right? Making you smile?"

I swallowed, never one to share feelings and shit. Jo knew this, but she was the only one who was able to nag me enough to get some answers from me. I closed my eyes and nodded. "She's fucking perfect. I didn't think I

could care about someone again like this after Abigail. But fuck, she's—" I opened my eyes and cut myself off, my eyes landing on Lena in the doorway.

Watery eyes stared back at me, and when I took her in fully, lust slammed into me. A sexy, nervous smile lifted her lips. Her pert tits were encased in a tight top that allowed me to take full advantage of their roundness.

"I made you a coffee, Lena." I pulled out the seat next to me and indicated she should come and sit. I had no idea how much she'd heard of me pouring my heart out, but it seemed enough. Lena nodded and blinked rapidly before she headed over to me. As soon as she sat, I rested my arm on the back of her chair and stroked my thumb over the exposed skin at the base of her neck.

The scrape of Jo's mug brought my attention to her. Her coffee was lifted to her lips, her eyes flicking between the two of us. Despite the positioning of her mug, I saw the trace of a grin on her face. After taking a sip, she put her drink down. "So, Lena." I held back my groan, wondering what the hell she was going to say. I never quite knew with my crazy-arse sister-in-law. "Do you cook?"

I had nothing. No idea where she was going with this.

Staring at Jo in confusion, I turned to Lena, sure my face mirrored my nonplussed thoughts.

"Erm"—Lena glanced at me wide-eyed before focusing on Jo—"sure."

Jo's mouth curved into a grin and she nodded in approval. "Thank Christ for that. I freakin' hate cooking, plus I'm pretty crap at it. No more filling up your freezer, Mace."

I snorted. "Will you kick me or some shit if I tell you I'm relieved by that news?"

Throwing me a mock scowl, she then addressed Lena. "I'll let you take it from here then. Awesome."

Bewildered, Lena opened her mouth a couple of times before saying to me, "You don't cook? What grown-arse man doesn't cook?"

"Hey, I cook," I defended myself. "I just have better things to do than spend time in the kitchen, is all."

"It's true." Jo sounded exasperated. "He's a lazy shit at times."

"Hey!" I protested.

"What? It's true. You'd live on takeout every day of the week if you could."

I didn't dare tell her that sometimes I threw her food away and did just that. "I'm busy running my business, and shit."

"And shit!" she bit back. "Anyhow, Liam and I will stop by next Saturday night then, and you can cook for us for a change." Her small smile quickly shifted into something much more sinister. "Hell, scrap that. You can both have Abi overnight next Saturday instead. Cook yourselves something while I get down and dirty with your brother."

I could already see her planning it all out in her head.

"Bloody hell, I don't want to hear it. But sure, yeah, we'll have Abi for the night, right, Lena?" I glanced over at her to double-check. Pink coloured her cheeks, her eyes bright and wide. Fuck, she was damn beautiful. I had to kiss her. How could I not when she looked so at ease and relaxed? I planted a kiss on her unsuspecting mouth, not missing her gasp at the contact. I kept it gentle and short, aware that my growing cock while in the same room as Jo and my niece was not something I wanted.

Pulling away, Lena lazily opened her eyes. Her cheeks were even pinker, and it took everything in me not to demand another kiss.

Clearing her throat, Lena said, "Sure, we can do that."

"Brilliant." Jo's response drew my attention. She looked far too happy with herself and my newfound situation. I knew she was relieved, that she worried about me too damn much. I simply nodded at her, a silent gesture to let her know everything was coming together and I was good. I didn't miss her eyes glistening or her swallowing. She stood abruptly. "Okay," she all but squeaked, not sounding at all Jo-like. "Me and this munchkin are going to get out of your hair, and I'll see you during the week, right, Mace?"

She posed it as a question, but I knew she expected me to get my arse to her house as soon as possible. I nodded.

"It was so lovely to meet you, Lena. You guys have a great weekend."

I stood and headed to Abi, unfastening her from her seat. Lifting her out, I kissed her cheek and whispered that I loved her before passing her to her mum. Jo planted a kiss on my cheek and squeezed me into a hug around Abi.

"Love you." I nodded at her words. "I expect you for dinner on Tuesday. Jo and Preston are coming by too."

"Righto. Love you, too." I made a mental note to prepare Lena to meet Jo's brother, Preston, and her best friend, Ella. She's need all the preparation she could get meeting the whole damn family.

Releasing me, Jo waved at Lena, shouted goodbye, and breezed out the door, leaving me crazy exhausted. I turned to Lena, aiming for a look of apology. "So, that's Jo."

"That's Jo." She laughed. "I like her."

"She'll do," I agreed.

"Your brother." She snorted at her own joke.

"Seriously, woman. Not you too." I strode towards her, pulled her from her chair, and lifted her so her arse perched on the table. "Now, no more fucking talking." Standing between her legs, I pressed my mouth against hers and released a moan, sure there wasn't a better place I wanted to be.

Chapter Ten

LENA

I'd been able to spend just one more night with Mace before Diesel had returned and told me it was safe to go home. While relief swept through me at seeing my brother greet me at the club door, hesitancy made my feet feel like lead.

Mace held my hand walking towards Diesel. While this had become the norm over the last month, his finger caressing my palm was not. I had no idea how Diesel would react and foolishly I hadn't even thought to discuss it with Mace prior to him taking me home. I couldn't imagine Diesel would be pleased about my and Mace's relationship, but I would fight for it if I needed to.

I was also stupidly sad that I'd only managed two nights of bliss with Mace. It had been pretty damn perfect being locked away, wrapped up in each other. I was reluctant to let it go.

Diesel embraced me once I was within reach. I made to release Mace's hand, but he held firm. Kissing my head, Diesel asked if I was okay. I nodded. "You?" I asked, stepping back.

My brother returned my nod. "Yeah, all good, sis." He paused a moment, looking over both of us, while I held my breath, my heart rate picking up speed under his observant stare. "Mace." He sent Mace a chin lift, stepped forward and embraced him, patting him on the back. Moving away again, he squinted at the two of us, then focused on Mace. "Is it like that?"

Mace's response was immediate. "Yeah, it is." Surprising the hell out of me, Mace released my hand and threw his arm around me, pulling me close.

"You claiming her?"

Holy crap. Hell no!

"Hey, dickwad," I addressed my Neanderthal brother. "I'm your baby sister. Don't confuse me with anything else in the club. Mace is also *not* a part of Deadwood either."

Before I could continue, Mace chuckled, tugging me even closer to his side. "Yeah, she's mine."

I threw Mace an irritated glare, which I knew I didn't pull off considering my inner cheerleader was shaking her pompoms and doing cartwheels. I half expected Mace to be grinning, all smug-like, similar to the patched-in members when they took women. Instead, his eyes were fierce, determined, letting me know 100 percent that what was happening between us was real.

Unable to speak, afraid I'd blurt out something stupid like professing myself to be his, I remained silent. I cleared my face of my frown, letting him know everything I was too afraid to voice.

We were each other's.

"Okay." Diesel's voice was laced with humour. "Nothing like keeping your distance, right, Mace? Tell me how that worked out for you again?" He chuckled as he turned, holding the door open for us as Mace nudged me to follow.

"Piss off, Diesel."

Diesel's laugh rang loud when we entered the main bar, pulling people's gazes towards us. I scanned the room, taking comfort in Mace's warmth and strength. Releasing a breath once I'd noted I knew everyone in the room, I placed my hand in Mace's back pocket, revelling in the contact.

As we sat, I couldn't help but feel like I wasn't privy to something that may have passed between Mace and Diesel. My brother was being unbelievably calm about this whole situation. I knew he liked and respected Mace, but I'd never known Diesel to behave like this around me. Although, admittedly, over the last few years I'd never been remotely ready to date a guy.

My thoughts were interrupted when Mace scooted up close to me on the bench seat, his thigh brushing against mine. His arm circled the back of the bench, and his hand rested on my neck, a gesture I was becoming familiar with. A bottle appeared before Mace and a glass before me. Diesel then sat opposite us.

Before I had the chance to ask my brother if he was okay with me and Mace, Diesel started speaking. "Riots having been pulling shit with the Drifters. Planting stuff in their businesses, calling in the law." Mace's hand stilled against my skin, and his muscles became taut. "They've never pulled this shit before, especially getting involved in any way with the police."

"Did you not think I could have helped find shit out for you? Fuck, Diesel—"

"No. I needed you with Lena." He glanced at me.

While there was a heap of club business I had no clue about, Diesel always told me as much as he could. It helped my stress levels to be in the loop and not be taken by surprise.

"But," my brother continued, "I need you to help out now, make a few calls."

"Done," Mace said, his voice hard.

There was something else wrong, something Diesel was building up to. A frown dipped his brow, and his jaw ticked. I knew his tells. And whatever it was, it was clear Mace was at the centre of it and wouldn't like it.

Mace was moving to pull his phone from his pocket when Diesel stopped him. "Just wait, brother. There's more."

I moved my hand and rested it on Mace's thigh. Above the table, he gave no outward sign of my gesture, but his tight muscle relaxed a little.

"Nox is trying to make a deal for early release by giving up some serious intel."

Even though Mace and I had yet to talk about his history with Nox, I knew the name, and I knew the bare-bones story of the tragedy surrounding his fiancée's death. I remained still, trying to stay calm while waiting for the explosion.

"Over my dead body."

Hearing Mace's deadly calm voice speak with such conviction sent a chill through me. He was serious. Closing my eyes, I took the time to count my breaths, having no clue how to process this conversation. Mace shifting and moving away from me snapped my eyes open. He stood abruptly, his face devoid of emotion.

"I have to go." He nodded at the table and walked away without a backward glance.

What the fuck!

My eyes widening in a combination of hurt and disbelief, I clambered off the bench. Diesel reached out and grabbed my arm. "Just leave him to get his shit together, Lena."

I snatched my arm away, my disbelief transferring to my brother. I had to wonder why men thought they could sort shit out on their own, because it never fucking worked. And there was no way Mace was dismissing me like that.

I raced after him and called out when my feet hit the tarmac. He stopped outside his car and angled his head low. He remained in that position, waiting for me.

"Care to tell me why you thought it was okay to leave me like that?"

He turned, surprise etched on his face. While we'd known each other for years, and had had forty-eight hours of "get to know me" time, he'd never seen me pre-attack before. It seemed my inner diva was itching to get out and eager to find her voice.

"Because I have to wonder, Mace, whether I need to call you on your shit and put you in place or kick you in the balls until you start begging for my forgiveness." My voice held a slight waver on the last word, but I was determined to stay strong and hold true.

His eyes flashed with heat, and he took a large stride towards me, putting us almost toe to toe. I angled my head to look at him. Emotions flashed across his face, many I couldn't even begin to decipher. Just as I was about to tell him to choose one, his lips crashed down on mine. He took my lips in a fierce kiss. My mouth opened immediately for him, allowing him to take what he needed. He was in pain. He needed to let go and let me in. Deepening the kiss, he coaxed my tongue with his, allowing a slight caress.

His mouth was perfect. His kiss sinful and delicious.

The pounding of my pulse flooded my ears, almost mimicking the tempo of our lips moving against each other's. Trailing a hand up my back, he stopped midway and pulled me tighter against him. Repositioning my head, I embraced every stroke, every caress. A wanton groan escaped into his mouth when I settled against his straining cock.

Breathless, I eased the kiss, allowing it to slow, before leaning my head away.

Mace rested his forehead against mine and tugged me into a hug. "I'm sorry. I just reacted, and then thought I was protecting you."

"Don't."

"What, protect you?" he questioned.

I sighed. "You can protect me. That's not the problem. It's the shutting me out that I won't allow." Pressing my face tightly against his shirt, I inhaled his scent, smiling at the mixture of soap and Mace.

A deep sigh escaped him. "I won't. I promise, but I just need time."

"Okay," I agreed. I stepped out of his embrace. "But tomorrow we need to talk about this."

He cupped my cheek. I leaned into his touch and smiled. "Bring a change of clothes to work tomorrow."

I raised my brows in question.

"I want you back in my bed tomorrow. Hell, I want you to come home with me now." I was so tempted to shove him in the car and plant myself down in the passenger seat, but I restrained myself. "I know I won't sleep well tonight, and I have some calls to make. Okay?"

I nodded reluctantly, keeping my smile fixed in place.

"And I promise we'll talk tomorrow." Placing a chaste kiss on my lips, he took my hand in his, led me back to the club entrance, opened the door, and walked me inside. My eyes connected with Diesel's and he threw me a wink. Mace turned me in his arms when we reached Diesel's table and kissed me gently. While it wasn't passionate or hungry, it told me I'd be on his mind. I could live with that.

I reluctantly sat down, my cheeks warm when I glanced around the room to see a whole heap of smirks.

"Lena will come home with me tomorrow, and I may need Kid to stop by for a couple of hours at the office."

"Just let him know what you need." Diesel stood and pulled Mace into a man hug. I noticed the nod Mace gave to something that was whispered in his ear. Diesel sat back down, and Mace threw me a faint smile.

"See you in the morning, Lena. Call me if you need me, okay?"

"Will do." I watched him leave, wishing I could follow. When the door closed behind him, I rested my head against the tabletop. "I'm so screwed."

Diesel laughed. "I think you both are, princess."

#####

It was late by the time we went home. I'd expected Diesel to grill me a little, but he was exhausted. He'd managed to simply grunt at me once he'd locked the front door, set the alarm, and kiss me on the head, before disappearing to his bedroom.

That left me edgy. Pent-up energy travelled through my limbs. The past forty-eight hours had left me tired but crazily wired. From me and Mace forming our relationship—after wild, hot monkey sex—to my meeting some of his family, to then discovering my brother approved, while the ghosts of Mace's past had come knocking on the door, it was no wonder my mind was buzzing.

I didn't really have girlfriends I could text or call to vent to. It was something I missed. My uni friends had moved on, going forward with their own lives after I left. A few had tried to stay in touch, but that first year after the attack was especially hard. I'd been in a dark place, and nobody was really able to reach me. Not even Diesel. It had been hard on him.

Lying in my bed, I thumbed through my Kindle for something easy to read. The knowledge of how badly Diesel had taken my attack always hit me hard when I thought about it. I really did need to take full control of my life, for his sanity as well as my own. I needed to get out from under his feet and out of his house. If he guessed that I was even thinking such a thing, I knew he'd hit the roof. He'd never admit to me how much he hurt, how lost and alone he really was. Sadness hit me, quickly followed by renewed determination.

I would get there. Come hell or high water, we'd both find our happy place.

I picked up my phone, deciding I should really make an effort to get to know some of the women at the club better. I was friendly with a few, Janie included, but we weren't quite at the stage of pick up the phone and talk shit yet. One day, though, it would be good to make that happen.

Instead, I texted Mace. After the news of Nox, he wouldn't be in a place where he needed to talk. I got that, respected it even. It didn't mean that I couldn't let him know I was thinking about him.

Me: Don't stay up too late. I don't want you falling asleep on me tomorrow. :]

I realised I was waiting, staring at my goddamn phone, waiting for him to text me. After just two days I'd apparently become needy. I snorted in derision, shook my head at myself, and placed my phone and Kindle on my bedside table. I flicked off the light and lay back, pulling the sheet over me.

I'd closed my eyes for barely five seconds before I released an annoyed huff. I turned to my side and stared at my phone, just seeing its outline in the darkness, helped by the light spilling in from the moon. I grabbed the phone and reopened my text.

Me: Miss you.

It was what I'd really wanted to let him know the first time, so why fool myself or attempt to play games? Life was too damn short for bullshit. Satisfied, I placed the phone back and snuggled down.

He didn't need to text me back. My message was enough for both of us.

I yawned, turning over, my bed creaking lightly. I placed my palm on my cheek and forced my breathing to slow. It was amazing that even when truly bolloxed, it could be difficult to fall asleep. It was one of those damn nights. I wasn't quite sure how long I'd been lying in the darkness debating counting sheep when I heard the faint rumble of a motorbike. It moved closer until it suddenly stopped. I held my breath in anticipation. There were occasionally times when someone would come by to speak to Diesel in an emergency if he'd called them over. But I didn't hear any movement coming from the back of the house or the hallway.

I released my breath and breathed shallowly, remaining quiet so I could listen. My breathing and my heartbeat were the only sounds registering. Then crunching gravel. Soft footfalls. I sat up and climbed out of bed, making my way to the window. We lived in a two-storey house, which meant I'd be able to get a good view of the yard and driveway.

The security light flicked on, making me jump, lighting up my room. A quiet curse followed. I nudged the blinds aside to peer through my window, my heart speeding up and my stomach doing backflips when I saw him. Mace.

He stood below my bedroom window, his phone in hand. Pushing the blinds aside fully, I opened the window and leaned out. "Mace?"

Immediately, his head tilted up, his eyes meeting mine, taking my breath away in an instant. A wide, perfect grin spread across his face.

"You okay?" I asked.

He nodded. "I am now."

"Give me a sec." I darted back into my room and made my way quietly into the hallway then headed downstairs. After deactivating the alarm, I unlocked and opened the front door, my fingers clumsy in my eagerness.

Pulling the door open, he was before me in an instant. His lips on mine. Claiming me. Possessing me. I gave him everything I had, everything he needed as I leaned into the kiss, standing on my tiptoes and opening to him.

He spun me around, using the movement to back me up. He closed and locked the door, then pressed me against it. His tongue caressed mine, our lips dancing perfectly. Hands on my arse, he tugged me towards him, his

groin pressing against my stomach. Mace groaned and pulled away a fraction, lavishing me with small kisses, working his mouth down my neck.

"I missed you, too, Lena."

I grinned and released a needy sigh as his wet mouth latched on to my nipple through my thin cami. "I sort of figured that out." He bit down lightly, making me gasp.

"I didn't want to sleep without you."

I pushed my chest against him, demanding more as he continued to caress my breasts and nipples, his hand joining his mouth to work both over. "You want to sleep?"

He laughed and leaned away, lowering his eyes to mine. "After, yeah."

Smiling, I tugged him towards me, backing away and heading for the stairs. "Hold on." I paused beside the alarm, resetting it, and then led Mace to my room. My girly bits cheered while my heart beat rapidly. I was so damn excited that he'd come for me.

Once in my room, Mace closed the door and flicked the lock. I grinned before taking him by surprise and launching myself at him. I was impressed with his ability to catch and manoeuvre me. Though, I hadn't really expected anything less from this man.

After stripping each other quickly, we fell onto my mattress, making hasty work of building ourselves into the frenzied state of exhaustion we both craved. Sated, Mace held me in his arms until we both passed out and drifted into oblivion.

#####

I stretched, my hand making contact with hard, delicious flesh. I turned my palm so it touched skin and squeezed, my nails lightly grazing Mace's moulded chest. A tempting groan escaped his lips, and my body reacted, my clit throbbing. I glanced across to see his eyes were closed and then down to see his morning wood standing to attention. A grin spread across my face as I remembered how he'd woken me the previous day with his face between my legs. It seemed too good an opportunity to pass by not returning the favour. Taking the few stealth qualities I possessed, I shimmied down the bed, trying not to wake him. While it wasn't the first time I'd taken him in my mouth, the fact that he slept sent thrills through my body. I wanted him to wake with my hot mouth around him. The anticipation made me eager, and my clit pulsed again. Fuck, I was horny.

Heading towards his groin, I allowed my gaze to soak up his beautiful tattoos. I was tempted to reach out and stroke them, kiss them, but I didn't risk it, not wanting him to wake until my mouth was wrapped around him. When I reached his sexy V, it screamed for me to lick every inch of it. His muscular body was formed to perfection, and I loved that he was mine. My brain virtually shut down as lust took over. I needed to work this man over until he begged me to either stop and ride him, or to continue and finish him. I was up for either of those tasks.

Not wanting to rouse him with my hands, I didn't touch him immediately. Instead, I ran my tongue over his hard length, taking the time to explore the softness of his skin that contrasted perfectly with the hardness of his cock. I traced my tongue around the end, dipping my tongue into the slit lightly, tasting the tang of his precum.

He groaned. I glanced up and watched his stomach muscles become taut, straining. I smiled before I opened wider, took him fully into my mouth, and sucked hard.

"Fuck, Lena." He was finally awake. I sucked even harder, causing a gasp.

I peered up at him; he lifted his head and gazed down at me. Lust-filled eyes stared back at me, and he bit his bottom lip.

"Suck it harder, baby," he said between moans, his eyes on mine.

I happily obliged, one hand moving to grip the base of his cock to help with the friction. Regulating my breathing, I inhaled through my nose before taking him deep until his cock hit the back of my throat. Lust, power, beautiful shock waves of energy pulsated through me. My body was on fire, needing to pull the same pleasure from him that he did me.

I expected him to drop his head back, but the look in his eyes, the grunts falling from his mouth unbidden, were enough for me to know he was enjoying watching me too much to let that happen.

"Lena, baby, fuck." He jerked his hips, thrusting into my mouth. I readjusted my rhythm to keep tempo. "I need inside you."

I continued sucking, using my tongue as much as I could to caress the underside of him. I was desperate for him too, but too eager trying to unravel him to stop.

He growled, his hips bucking as he fisted my hair. I took it all willingly. Just when I thought I had him, that he was going to explode, he pulled my head back so his cock popped out of my mouth. I gasped as he

effortlessly manoeuvred me to straddle him. He quickly reached for a condom, tore it open and rolled it over his cock. Mace then lined himself up against my pussy and tugged me down.

I threw my head back when he filled me completely. I was slick and he was hard, the perfect combination. Returning my gaze to his, I settled my hands on his chest. I looked down at them, splayed across his coloured ink. Always the perfect contrast. I smiled at the sight as I lifted myself up and pushed down, finding a pace that left me chasing my orgasm.

"Oh, God." I groaned when Mace reached out and pressed a digit against my clit. His fingers worked me over, light rubs followed by gentle pinches as I picked up my pace. I needed more. It was too gentle, too soft. "More, Mace," I said with a gasp.

He flipped me over and continued to move inside me. There was no slow and gentle. It was what I craved: rough and hard. Like a piston, he drove into me, his soft moans becoming grunts and heating my skin. His mouth then clashed with mine. He drew my tongue into his mouth and sucked before he pulled his head away and stared fiercely into my eyes as he ploughed into me.

My fingers clutched at his back, my nails digging into his flesh on each in-stroke. All too soon, my inner muscles tightened. My orgasm was about to hit. I bit my bottom lip, mildly aware it was morning, and my brother was a few rooms away. I held back my building scream.

Reading my body, Mace bent low and took my nipple into his mouth, sucking and biting it lightly. A gasp escaped my lips as I hung on for dear life. "Fuck, Mace!" I whispered. "Harder."

He growled, scooped his hands behind my back, and held on to my shoulder for a firm grip. My world exploded as he pounded into me, fierce, possessive, and so hard I tasted the blood from biting down on my lip. "That's it, baby. Come for me."

I jerked and writhed against him, unable to voice my pleasure. Shifting my hands to his arse, I held on tight and pulled him against me, spiralling into oblivion as my orgasm fully burst free. On a guttural groan, Mace buried his face against my neck, thrust once more and released inside me. I contracted around him, causing another groan to escape his lips.

Replete and euphoric, I wrapped my arms around him. "Can we wake up like that every morning?"

He raised his head and leaned on his arms to face me. "As long as we fall asleep like that too, you've got a deal." The playful grin and sincerity in his eyes had me swallowing back my emotion.

"Should I be sensible and start saying this is all too much too soon?" I asked. I hated the words, but they were genuine, and I needed to voice them. I wasn't a teenager, nor was I a lovesick idiot—in theory.

"I'm yours," he replied. "I have been for a long time. With the connection we have, the lives we've led, if we're sure, why doubt or wait?"

His words took me by surprise. For all the time I'd known Mace, I knew for sure he was a man of few words and only spoke when he had something he truly needed to say. He didn't bullshit. Tears stung my eyes as my heart fluttered. "Can it really be that easy?"

Mace quirked a brow and dotted a kiss at the end of my nose, making me wriggle it. "You call years of waiting, years of watching you and lusting over you easy?" He shook his head, eyes serious, mouth smiling. "Lena, you're mine. It's the way it is and the way it will continue to be. You good with that?"

I nodded, not daring to speak for a moment in case my bubbling emotions broke free. His emotions mirrored my own and we were finally on the right path to make this work. I released a breath and said, "You're mine, too."

His smile dropped, his face as serious as his eyes. "Always." He pressed his mouth to mine and proceeded to kiss me silly.

Holy shitballs! Always sounds pretty perfect to me.

Chapter Eleven

MACE

I wasn't quite sure what to expect after staying that first night with Lena at her place. While Diesel had effectively given me the go-ahead to date his little sister, I couldn't help but remain on edge and wait for him to change his mind. Two weeks in, it was yet to happen.

Like me, Diesel was buried in work, and stress. This came as no surprise to anyone, especially me. Between a new job coming in at work and all the bullshit with Nox, it seemed far too many hours were spent buried in research and working out what the fuck Nox was offering to try for release. I even had been in touch with Enfield to try to figure out what was going on. He seemed reluctant at first to talk with me, but still, I knew he would come good in the end.

Trying to find a balance between the past and present, at first, seemed difficult, impossible almost. Lena, however, very quickly put me straight. I loved that she didn't take any crap from me. There were a few times after I'd first heard the news about Nox that I'd spent hours in the office, digging through files and history, that left me exhausted and late to bed. It didn't take long before she demanded my attention, making it clear that she'd support me with all things Nox, but not at the expense of my own "mental health" or our relationship.

I'd scoffed when she'd worried about me, but understood her concern for the two of us. She'd helped me put it in perspective when she'd forced me to look in the mirror, at the exhaustion evident under my tired eyes. It helped that she'd followed it up with a sexy-as-fuck massage intended to relax me. Hell, all it did was rev me up so much that by the time she asked me to turn over on the bed so she could work on my chest, my cock was standing at attention and desperate for her heat.

She didn't disappoint. When her mouth wrapped around my cock, I only allowed her two deep sucks before I flipped her over and drove into her from behind. Lena was one hell of a woman, and for her, I made sure I mastered the elusive balance that I'd been initially struggling with.

I had a big job come up with a personal security detail for some bigwig from overseas. There were another two weeks of his contract left, which included 24/7 security. I'd pulled in some of Diesel's crew for support, those

who had specialist training and experience in security or were ex-military, as well as used my own guys, grinning when they'd donned suits. The gig was worth a lot of cash, so they did it willingly, smoothly following instructions and doing their job well. While I took a few of the high-profile shifts, I tried to stay close to the office as much as possible.

I had no issues when Kid called me pussy-whipped. It was a status I loved. Every night since I'd appeared outside Lena's door like some lovesick kid, we'd spent our nights together, usually in bed, and occasionally heading to her place so she could catch up with Diesel.

We'd fallen into a pattern so effortlessly that it was easy to question it, wondering when something would come along to screw it up, but at those times, Lena would roll her eyes at me, sometimes without even asking what was going on in my head, like a damn mind reader. She often commented that I grounded her, eased her anxiety, but I swore black and fucking blue it was the other way round.

My phone rang, causing me to look away from my computer screen. I picked it up, looking at who was calling before I answered. "Enfield, what's up?"

"Nox is offering names to Narcotics, looking for relocation and low security." There was no preamble as he skipped his greeting.

I closed my eyes, slowing my breathing, attempting to get my shit together. "But he got life imprisonment for murdering a fucking police officer. He can't appeal."

"He's not," Enfield interrupted. "Nor is he looking at a release deal, which was what we originally thought. The bastard knows there'd be no chance for release."

"So why make the deal then?" My brows dipped in confusion. I'd seen Nox kill Abigail, and I wasn't the only one who'd witnessed the nightmare. Hell, even in court he'd admitted it with a grin, throwing me a fucking wink. It was not surprising that I regularly dreamed of wrapping my hands around his throat, wiping the fucker from this earth.

Enfield sighed into the phone, the sound of his chair creaking hitting my ears. "I have no idea yet. He wants to be moved to Hartley's Low Security and to offer up names involved in drug trafficking and production. Plus," he continued, this time with hesitancy in his voice, "he's also saying he's got the intel on his inside man."

I sat bolt upright. "Inside man? You mean in the department?"

"That's what he's saying. Mentioned Abigail and the setup."

I stood abruptly, my chair scraping back. I looked ahead, through the open doorway to see Lena's concerned gaze on me. I turned away from her, staring out the window, sweeping my free hand through my hair.

"Part of the deal is he wants a meet with you."

"What the fuck for?" My voice was low and fierce.

"Don't know. Says there's something he wants you to hear first. But I don't know, Mace. He's a sick fuck, a sadistic one at th—"

"When?" I asked. Part of my brain screamed at me that I was making a mistake even contemplating seeing him, but fuck, the opportunity to find out what the hell went wrong that day rode me too hard to refuse.

"Mace"—his voice was filled with defeat—"I don't think you should. This whole thing is messed up and smells like bullshit to me. He's playing at something."

I absolutely agreed with him. Five years later, causing a stir and dragging up the past while apparently making offers that the narcotics team would no doubt be shooting their loads over went against everything I knew about Nox; and I knew a lot about the fucker, enough to write a damn biography. "When?" I asked again, my voice hard.

"Next week. I'll get back to you with a time and date."

"Okay." I nodded once, allowing the news to sink in.

"Any way I can talk you out of it?"

I gave a humourless laugh. "No."

Sighing once more, Enfield gave a grunt. "I'll be in contact soon then."

"Thanks, Enfield." I ended the call before he was able to respond and placed my phone in my pocket.

Even though my brain was a fog of confused and pissed off, I still knew the moment Lena entered the room. Her sweet scented shampoo reached my senses, that damn peach smell I loved so damn much. Her heat pressed against my back a moment before her arms circled me, her hands pressing on my chest, her face on my back.

We remained quiet and still for a few beats. It allowed me time to gather my shit. I still hadn't talked to Lena fully about Abigail's death, and even though the thought of telling the story caused a knot in my stomach, she needed to know.

I turned around in her arms and tugged her towards me, pressing a kiss on the top of her head. "Can we get out of here?" We needed to sit and talk

things through. The office wasn't the place to do it. Hell, I also needed a beer or five.

Lena nodded against my chest and looked up at me. A frown sat between her brows. Raising my hand to her face, I smoothed it out. Her sigh at my touch made my dick twitch and my heart constrict. Everything about Lena was fucking amazing, and I just hadn't seen her coming, stepping into my world and tearing it wide open, making me feel again.

Before I could talk myself out of what I had to share, I pressed a small kiss against her mouth and stepped away. In less than five minutes, we'd locked up and were heading to my house.

#####

Abigail and I had left the house together that day, me giving her a final kiss at the doorway before I locked up behind us. If I'd known it was going to be our last, I would have done everything differently.

I would have made sure I'd inhaled the fresh scent of her lavender shampoo and truly captured it in my sensory memory. I would have stroked her cheek when I'd brushed my tongue against hers, allowed myself to absorb just how soft her skin was.

There was so much I wished I had done. The main thing being I would never have included her in the mission in the first place. Then again, Abigail wouldn't have listened anyway. She had been as stubborn as she had been beautiful. *Fuck, I miss her.*

I'd sensed something was off immediately when gathered with my team at the rendezvous point. I'd always listened to my gut instinct in the past, and voiced it. That time was no different. I'd triple-checked the intel, scrutinized my team, and told my second, O'Leary, as well as Abigail that I didn't like it one fucking bit.

As soon as I voiced my concerns, O'Leary agreeing that the whole bust felt off, the team knew we'd back off and regroup.

That didn't happen.

The choice had been taken from us when Toxic appeared in the doorway across the street, carrying a handgun. When he'd stepped outside, his hand was latched on a young woman's arm. The blonde-haired girl couldn't have been more than seventeen. Dirty stains streaked her cheeks, while sobs wracked her body. A fresh red mark sat across her cheekbone, raw and swollen, and blood was smudged across her lips. The fucker Toxic had always lived up to his patch name.

When his voice pierced the air, I knew we wouldn't be backing away. "You piece of shit. You won't argue with a client a-fucking-gain. You hear me?"

He'd then forced her to the ground and slammed his foot against her stomach just as Nox joined him.

My team had tensed around me, just waiting for my go-ahead. Nothing about the situation was good. If anything, it had become a whole damn lot worse, and unpredictable. I'd always hated unpredictable.

I nodded to O'Leary. We had no choice but to act. I had no doubt either Toxic or Nox would kill the girl unless we stepped in. While my team took their positions, Toxic aimed his gun at the cowering form. We then moved in as one.

All it took was our shift in movement betraying our positions for all hell to break loose. Screams and shouts erupted around us as I took the barest of seconds to take in the new play.

It was a set-up, that much was obvious by their swift reaction and the extra men appearing. As the reality settled heavily in my gut, Toxic had leered directly at me, Nox a side step behind him. Nox had winked before he took aim and fired.

My life altered in that moment. It was when I'd wished for death, wished I could take it all back for a do-over. Instead, I'd watched in slow motion as Abigail fell to the ground to my right. I'd followed the direction of Nox's gun.

The fucker had known she was mine.

Shots filled the air while I launched at Abigail's still form. She'd worn a vest. I'd known because I'd helped strap her in. But a bulletproof vest did nothing to stop a bullet to the brain. I'd struggled to look away from her when I heard my name shouted on repeat. Refusing to drag my eyes from her lifeless body, I'd remained fixed at her side, my hands roaming her face, refusing to register the blood on her skin and on my hands.

Nox's voice cut through the pounding in my ears. "What are you going to do now then, fucker?"

My arm had moved before my brain had the chance to catch up. Barely two seconds later, Toxic hit the ground, having moved in front of the shot, protecting his cock-sucking pres. One clear shot between the eyes, a virtual mirror injury to Abigail's. I didn't bother looking at Toxic's motionless

form, my focus on a smirking Nox. He seemed unfazed that I'd just taken out one of his men.

Rage turned my sight hazy when I re-aimed, my hand shaking, tears also brimming my eyes. My finger rested on the trigger, but before I had the chance to pull, O'Leary had charged into Nox, throwing him to the ground and straddling him. He was muttering something close to his ear. I hope it was the promise that I'd make sure he burned for this.

I'd known I'd shouted my fury, my voice hoarse with broken sobs of agony. Nox's laughter had then reached my ears as I'd cradled Abigail to my chest. I'd made a vow then to not rest until the fucker was dead. He'd known exactly what he was doing when he took Abigail from me. He'd thought he'd won, but I'd promised myself that he'd pay. Prison was too good for him.

It was after the inquest, one that ruled me taking down Toxic was self-defence, courtesy of my team's statement, that I found myself back on duty. But my focus was off, my commitment changed. A fierce desire for justice used to fill my days on the job. Since Abigail's death, I'd become hollow. No longer was I thirsting to take down the bad guys for the good of it. Instead, my mission had changed. I focused on taking down every fucking asshole connected to Nox, while still trying to discover who'd betrayed us.

It had been clear to all of my team that the whole bust was a sham. There was no doubt we were set up. The consequence to that was irrevocable, and Abigail's death lay at my feet. I should have got us the fuck out of there as soon as my gut instinct had spoken. Instead, with blood on my hands, after her murder I'd been on a course for destruction, happily taking down every affiliate of Riots in the process.

#####

Lena hadn't interrupted once as I told her about Abigail. She'd listened intently, sometimes her eyes misting in tears, while allowing me to stand and pace when I needed to. I ended sitting in front of her, elbows on my knees. Finally finished, I stared at her, half expecting the familiar hollowness to settle in my chest, as it often did when I was buried in the memory and guilt of Abigail. But it hadn't. Looking into Lena's eyes, seeing her emotions transparent, her breathing controlled, it was the first time I'd not felt alone or struggled to breathe.

I had no idea what to do with that.

Exhausted, I rubbed my hands over my face, only to quickly remove them when I heard her move. She stood in front of me, reached for my hand, and tugged. Obediently, like some lost fucking lamb, I stood and followed her to my bedroom.

Stripping her clothes from her body, she moved to my bed, pulled back the sheets, and patted the empty spot beside her. My spot. I released a sigh, expelling the heaviness sitting there. I removed my clothes, offered her a small smile, and headed to the bed. Once pressed on the soft mattress, she curled around me, half her body moving and covering my own, her head on my chest, with one of her hands against my neck, soothingly stroking my skin.

I couldn't remember the last time I'd accepted comfort. Even at Abigail's funeral, I'd remained alone. Things had not been right with me and my brother back then, and especially not with Jo and how I'd let her down. I hadn't felt like I'd deserved anything other than the pain that had consumed me.

"Thank you." Lena's breath washed over my chest, warm and comfortable.

I angled my head to press my lips against her hair. I knew it was important, sharing all the horrors of our pasts, the shit that made our nightmares all too real.

"So...." She cleared her throat. "What's happening with Nox now?"

"My old boss, Enfield, said he's not looking for early release." She nodded against my chest, signalling that she was listening. "But he's looking to share information for a deal to be moved to a low security prison," I continued. "I just have no idea why, what he's up to."

Lena pressed her lips against my chest for a moment, then settled herself back against me with a small sigh. "Have you worked out how you're going to find out?"

I quirked my lips, surprising myself considering our discussion, but she was so resolute and unwavering, I couldn't help but feel as if the future finally held something more. "I haven't quite figured it all out yet, but I can't let this go." I needed Lena to understand the truth of my words. The promise I'd made five years earlier stood true. Nox wouldn't be getting away with breaking open my world. "I'm seeing him next week though." Stiffening in my arms, Lena remained silent, no doubt waiting for me to continue. "He said he wanted to speak to me and share some shit."

"And you're going." It wasn't a question. She already knew me well enough to know I'd be all over him.

"He's saying he's got the name of the rat in the department. The one who warned them of the sting."

"And you believe him?"

"I believe he knows who it was since he was no doubt the one dealing with it all. But do I think he's going to give it up? No chance. I just need to work out what his angle is."

Leaning back from me slightly and rising to lean her head on her hand and perch on her elbow, Lena looked down at me, her eyes filled with concern. "Can I ask you something, about that day?"

I nodded.

"I don't understand why he did it, what he was hoping to achieve." She blanched. "That sounds so callous. I'm so sorry." Panic flashed across her face.

I reached up and stroked her cheek. "It's okay, baby, I get what you're saying. Why'd he take the shot knowing he'd go down for life?"

Giving a slow nod, she opened her mouth to speak but held back.

"What're you thinking?"

"It's just, I've heard so many stories about Nox. Even met him a couple of times by happenstance when I was younger, which was enough for me to know he was dangerous. But I also know from Diesel that he's smart. By taking Abigail's life"—I clenched my jaw on instinct, only to ease up when she cupped my face, her eyes pleading—"he would have known he'd either end up in prison for life or dead if you'd been able to get to him first, right?"

It was true. For such a sadistic piece of shit, I also knew Nox graduated at the top of his class from university fifteen years earlier in engineering.

"So why do it?" she pressed.

Tugging her down to me so her cheek rested on my chest, I sighed and eased my fingers over the soft skin on her back. "I don't fucking know, baby. Don't get me wrong, I've tried to find out that exact thing over the years. Hell, maybe next week I'll find out." I really hoped so. I needed answers and closure, just as desperately as I needed to rip his rotten heart out of his chest.

She relaxed into me and sighed. The small sound eased my heart. I still struggled to get my head around Lena's ability to help me cope. I had no

idea how she did it, but lying with her in my arms, her warm skin pressed against my own, a semblance of peace worked its way into my system, a huge fucking miracle considering how emotionally spent I was.

"Always, baby." I angled my head to press my lips against her forehead before relaxing and closing my eyes.

I didn't miss her mumbled, "Always," before I drifted off to sleep.

#####

The next day I headed into Maxi's Diner. It was a nice joint, but I wasn't there for food. I'd spotted McKenny's car there and simply couldn't resist heading inside.

Entering the establishment, I spotted him immediately. He had papers on the table next to a steaming mug, and sat alone. I headed straight towards him with no preamble and sat on the empty bench of his booth.

His gaze met mine, only a slight frown marring his over-tanned skin before his face smoothed out to impassive. In his late forties, I begrudgingly knew he looked young for his age. He worked out so he was fit too. "Ah, Mace, what can I do for you?" He eased back against the booth and picked up his drink. "Coffee, or are you not staying?" McKenny asked before taking a gulp.

"How's business?" My question didn't throw him. We'd had enough run-ins over the years that he wouldn't expect anything less. It just riled me that I couldn't get any of his shit to stick. But one day I would.

Placing his mug down, he smiled, linking his fingers together before him. "Good, thanks for asking. I'm actually due to be meeting a client about a build over in Coolum."

It amazed me he still played the architect game. I knew full well his main business was meth. I was yet to fucking prove it. "New meth lab, or a new place for your junkies to buy and hang out?" My gaze was unwavering, hard, yet my tone conversational.

"Now, now, Mace, you know such things are somewhat slanderous. And I'm not sure you have many friends left in the force these days, do you? Not sure how easily you'd be able to get yourself off the hook if I decided to press charges." He tilted his head. "Why exactly are you here? I would hate to think that you're here to have a chat with me. Unless of course you're looking for business advice, maybe needing a decent architect?"

"They have great pie here," I said. "Have you tried it?" He raised his brows but I didn't give him the chance to respond. "You know, you're pretty good. I'm sure if you asked for a side serve of bullshit they'd happily give it to you. Keep you stocked up."

When his jaw clenched, I smiled inside in victory. One day this fucker would break, and I'd try my hardest to be there to watch it. "You know, I heard Riots were looking for a new supplier. Heard their current provider was trying to rip them off by asking too much for shit meth." I was bullshitting completely. Other than knowing Riots did drug runs, and a few of their guys had been busted a few times, there was not one link to be found between Riots and McKenny. But the two had fingers in lots of bullshit pies, so the link, while still unknown, would soon reveal itself. With a little push over time.

"Meth you say? Isn't that something you know a lot about? Your father was resented, right, with meth charges as well as a whole plethora of offences, from what I read in the papers."

I smiled, loving that he was trying to get personal. It screamed he was pissed and trying to get me off track. My smile stretched into a full grin, teeth and all when he narrowed his eyes at me and my reaction. My dad had no power over me, and that included his past sins and fuck-ups. The only thing I waited daily to hear was the news that he was dead. I knew Liam and Jo waited for the same call.

"I appreciate your concern," I said, still grinning like an idiot. "You know what was interesting about that time just before he was sentenced?" I paused, seeing if he'd give me anything. Seemingly, he'd regained his composure, his expression void of emotion. "He decided to open up to me a little. Don't get me wrong, it wasn't a heartfelt father-son chat, but what he chose to share was interesting nonetheless. You want to know what he said?"

McKenny rolled his eyes. "Sure, why not. I love to be entertained before a client meeting. What did your meth-head father tell you?"

My smile dropped. "McKenny." The table stilled and it seemed as if the whole room paused around us. "Just that, your name. Don't you think that's curious?"

Watching his jaw clench and the vein in his temple throb, I half expected him not to answer. He then cleared his throat. "So, your father, who was high, said my name, and now, what, months later you tell me this

bedtime story. Any particular reason, Mace?" he sneered the word and once again I felt myself grinning.

"Nope. No reason. Just something I've been carrying and thinking about for a while. Now seemed as good a time as any to tell you all about it."

His eyes dragged away from me, and he looked towards the opening door. I followed his gaze to see a suited middle-aged guy heading towards the table. Balding and smiling and stinking of innocence. He had no idea he was getting into bed with the devil. Poor shmuck.

"Okay, good talk. I'll let you get on with it. Take it easy, Marshall." I slid out of the booth, nodding to the guy almost at the table, and walked out of the place whistling. It was a good question he'd asked about why now. I'd had no idea I was going to share it with him, but his reaction to Riots egged me on, demanded that I pushed for more. Taking down McKenny and Riots in one swoop would be a fucking dream. I just hoped that whatever crap Nox was going to spout would be at least a fraction of good news pointing me in the right direction. I doubted it though. Life just wasn't that kind, plus Nox was a psychotic bastard.

Chapter Twelve

LENA

I pulled out three beers for the guys at the bar and then headed over to Diesel. Mace had brought me to the club prior to leaving to visit Nox. I was a mess of nerves as I waited to hear the result of the conversation; my brother had attempted to get me to sit and have a drink while I waited, but I couldn't. Instead, I'd started cleaning the damn bar and serving drinks, hoping to be distracted.

Mace's visit hadn't been until four that afternoon, and with the few hours' drive needed to get there, I wasn't expecting him back till about eight or so. By 9:00 p.m., after listening to Diesel talking nonsense to me, trying to distract me, I'd pulled out the tequila and poured myself a few shots, chasing them down one after another, before opening a beer and taking a long pull. When my gaze settled on my brother, he looked back with wide-eyed concern.

"Get your arse around here now and sit."

I nodded, albeit reluctantly, and made my way around. Warmth filled my stomach from the alcohol, and I staggered a few times. Admittedly, I was a lightweight. After the shit from uni, it was rare I touched booze. Being drunk combined with my anxiety was not a good match as a rule. But my nerves were all over the place as I waited for Mace, and the hazy, numbing pull of the tequila was a better alternative than pacing a hole in the floor. Plus, virtually everyone in the bar was reacting to the nervous energy I was kicking out. It was as though the whole club was on high alert. In reality, they were looking on, waiting to see if I lost my shit.

My comfort levels over the weeks had been off-the-charts improved. What was even better in many ways was that my stress level and ability to cope with my anxiety had shifted. My new way of coping included two extremes; okay, possibly three. Silence, talking a ridiculous amount, and then my new favourite, getting down and dirty with Mace.

In the past, part of me shutting down was silence, but with that I'd blocked everything else, not even able to process people talking to me. With my growing ease and control, my silence was not so extreme. I found removing myself completely from a situation, being alone, was really

helping, and I was so bloody relieved as I was pretty sure that everybody coped that way in moments when they needed space.

With booze fuelling my mouth, it seemed my chatterbox self was in overdrive. I sat next to Diesel and Cole and proceeded to tell them all about the benefits of squats. This then quickly morphed into a play-by-play of how to make the best brownies, followed by a rundown of the dangers of filing and paper cuts. "That reminds me, have you ever used a cock ring? I was just thinking—"

Diesel choked on his beer and Cole released a deep laugh. The welcome sound reverberated around the bar, making me smile.

"Lena, what the fuck? Stop already." My gaze cut to Diesel and the horrified expression plastered on his face.

I tilted my head and squinted at him, closing my left eye. I could almost see his expression clearly if I closed it completely, my focus sharpening. "What?"

He shook his head, stood, and headed towards the other end of the bar.

"Something I said?" I asked Cole, genuinely bemused.

Cole grinned. "Maybe, darlin'."

"I was just asking as I have no one else to ask this shit."

Nodding, grin still firmly in place, Cole said, "I get it, but somehow I don't think your brother wants to think about you fucking someone."

My mouth gaped. Shit, I really needed to stop drinking. I hadn't even realised what I'd asked Diesel. "Right, erm... shit." Heat flushed my cheeks. "And I don't fuck."

Cole lifted a brow. "You don't?"

I clamped my mouth shut, wishing above all else I'd have a silent bloody moment rather than spouting my mouth off. "Well, yeah, I do, but it's, you know..."

Waiting for me to continue, Cole brought his beer to his mouth, looking every bit entertained. *Bastard.*

"It's more than simply fucking." I pressed my lips between my teeth, just wishing I would stop talking already. "Don't get me wrong, Mace fucks hard. Hell, if I told you what he gets up to with his tongue before he makes me scream—" I clamped my hand over my mouth.

Cole burst out laughing, again, at which point I placed my head on the bar, humiliated. Stupid bloody alcohol.

"I think it's probably a good thing Diesel left when he did, Lena. Damn, I'm half wishing I had too, but I've gotta say, seeing your embarrassment is pretty much worth listening to your dirty talk. Just wish I had my camera on."

I glanced up at him. "Don't you dare tell anyone about this, Cole, or I swear to God, I'll tell Diesel about the time you stole my panties and threatened to spank me."

A throat cleared behind us. I sat bolt upright, eyes still on Cole. I was pretty sure the look on his face mirrored my own. His jaw was clenched, and he wore a slight grimace. I would have preferred the presence behind me to be that of my brother, but I knew it wasn't. I also knew by the fact that he hadn't scooped me in his arms immediately, or placed a kiss against my neck, that Mace had at least heard the tail end of our conversation.

Heart rate spiking, I swallowed and knew I had to face Mace, hoping that he would be smiling in amusement.

He wasn't.

He looked pissed and tired. With my eyes firmly fixed on his, I offered a tentative smile that I was sure made me look like I had trapped wind. "You're back." *Way to state the obvious, dick.* "Do you want a drink or would you prefer to head home?" I ended with an awkward laugh. I had no idea how to handle this situation, whether I should address the big fucking elephant, or just plead ignorance.

"Err, okay. I'm outta here." Cole stood and darted away.

My gaze didn't waver from Mace's when Cole left or when he stepped closer and stood between my legs. My breath hitched, and I refocused on his eyes, ensuring I didn't go cross-eyed at our close proximity.

His hands came to my waist and he dragged me forward so I pressed hard against him. I reached out to steady myself, my hands landing on his arms. His muscles were taut against my fingers. Lowering his head, he brushed his lips across my cheek, travelling to my ear. "My hand on your arse while I fuck you tonight is going to be the biggest scream yet."

My pussy contracted in anticipation. He'd heard it all. It finally appeared as though my words had stopped flowing; all I could manage was a nod. Pulling back, he planted his lips hard against mine, but before it escalated into a satisfying kiss, he stepped back.

The groan escaping from my lips made him chuckle. "Let's get out of here." My voice was unsteady and needy. I couldn't wait to get back and

have him between my legs. That morning we'd had the awkward discussion of contraception. Well, I found it awkward; he didn't seem at all embarrassed. Since I was already on the pill and he hadn't had unprotected sex for four years, I eagerly awaited being able to ride him bare for the first time and every time after that.

Closing his eyes, Mace shook his head once. "I need ten minutes. I need to talk to Diesel." I nodded despite my frustration, expecting Mace to head off in my brother's direction. He surprised me by calling Diesel's name and indicating that he should come over. "What?" he asked when he looked down at me.

"Do you not need to talk to him in private or something?"

Stepping forward once more, he placed a hand on my cheek. "We don't do secrets, right?"

I shook my head and leaned into his palm, a smile lifting my lips. I took the moment to read him. While in the past I'd struggled doing so, I was getting much better at understanding Mace's tells. He looked exhausted, but calm, with no hidden levels of anger bubbling under the surface. Considering he'd just returned to collect me after meeting with Nox, I was as amazed as I was relieved. I wasn't quite sure what to expect, but it definitely wasn't the composed Mace before me.

"Come on, let's head to a table." He clasped my hands and pulled me to stand. Walking hand in hand to a table in the corner of the room, it was impossible to keep the tingling warmth from my stomach, or to ignore the increased pounding of my heart. I was a sucker for good old-fashioned hand-holding. I had no idea why exactly, but I found holding hands deeply personal. The feel of his strong hand holding mine was something real and solid, possessive and protective. And I fucking loved it. Maybe it was the simplicity of the action? It could have also been to do with the lack of touch, of human contact since uni. That could have possibly been why the normalcy sent me in a tailspin of giddy feeling and a craving to crawl up his body and make out with him.

Hell, who was I kidding. The booze made me horny as hell.

Squeezing my hand lightly when we sat, Mace kept his palm securely in my own, resting on my lap. I looked across at him and he chuckled.

"Do I dare ask how much you've had to drink?"

I grinned back. "Hey, I'm just impressed I walked across the room without falling on my arse." But since the rush of adrenaline at seeing

Mace, I was feeling remarkably sober.

A glass appeared in front of me, drawing my attention away from Mace and to my brother. "Drink this," Diesel all but grunted. "You need some water in your system, else who knows what you're likely to share."

Cheeks heating, I took hold of the glass and took a long drink. Mace's expression was bemused. "Do I dare ask?"

I shook my head, trying not to spill my water, and threw Cole a squinty-eyed frown when he laughed loudly. Once Diesel, Cole, and Kid were sitting around the table with us, I glanced at Mace in expectation.

Not one to preamble, he said, "I need a couple of your newest recruits, relatively unknown guys in town, to tail someone for me. Should be just a week or two. Can you do that?"

I glanced at Diesel, waiting for his response. He simply nodded and indicated Mace to continue.

"Nox gave me a name of the guy who gave up the intel. He gave me O'Leary."

I closed my eyes, knowing the name and understanding what a hit this would be for Mace. My fingers tightened against his hand.

"You believe him?" Cole asked.

"At the moment, it doesn't matter. He dropped his name for a reason, and I need to figure out why."

"Thought about going and talking to this O'Leary guy yourself first?" Diesel questioned.

"I will, but not first. I need your guys to be on his arse for the next couple of weeks first." He rubbed his free hand over his face before saying, "I can't even begin to let it be true that it's him. Not yet."

"O'Leary was Mace's second in command in his team," I interrupted.

All eyes landed on me, and Diesel nodded once more before he focused on Mace. "Anything I need to get my guys to look for in particular, anything to warrant an immediate call to you?"

I glanced at Mace, watching his jaw tic. Apparently, he wasn't as calm as I'd earlier thought. "Any meets with McKenny or any of Riots, I need to know."

Diesel raised his brow at McKenny's name. "McKenny and Riots? Now that's a fucking explosive combination."

"Who's McKenny?" I asked.

Mace lifted our joined hands to his mouth and planted a kiss on the back of my hand. "A bastard who seems desperate to get into my space and screw shit up."

My brows shot up. That effectively told me nothing. I knew it was a long shot, but I had to ask. "Any reason why you're not going to the cops with this? How about Enfield? You can trust him, right?" It wasn't exactly unheard of, working with the police. Hell, that was how we'd first met Mace when he was in the force and Diesel was helping him take down piece-of-shit biker gangs posing as clubs.

"Not on this one, babe. At least not yet. I've yet to figure out why Nox gave O'Leary up in the first place. It's not like I can secure a deal or anything for him. And until I can work out his game plan and O'Leary's involvement, it's best this one stays quiet."

It made sense. I didn't like it at all, but I understood his logic and need to keep this close.

Mace glanced around the guys. "If McKenny is connected to Riots, you know this shit will get a whole heap more personal, right?" He sounded almost eager when he spoke, as though the news wasn't exactly new to him.

That was information I'd file away for later. I had no idea why anything McKenny-related was personal, and to be honest, it scared the crap out of me. While Mace was in security, it was rare anything he dealt with or worked on touched his life. I'd asked him about it and there seemed to be nothing of consequence. It was also a reason why I'd been pleased he was no longer a police officer. The thought of him heading to work and not coming back to me made me sick to the stomach. All of the talk about Riots, who were dangerous and a law unto themselves, and this McKenny guy was enough to send my heart rate spiking.

I focused on my lap and our joined hands, breathing out long, calming breaths as discreetly as possible while counting in my head. I barely registered the conversation going on around me. While I knew they were speaking, I couldn't distinguish individual words. *One, two, three, four.* I forced my eyes open, not willing to close them and become lost. *Five, six, seven.* I stared hard at Mace's thumb, watching as it shifted and he started to draw small circles on my skin. *Eight, nine, ten.* My breathing, while not even, calmed a little as I focused on the mesmerising patterns he drew against me.

His breath against my ear made me jump. "You ready for that spanking?"

My head lifted in surprise, almost taking out Mace's nose in the process. My gaze caught his immediately.

"You with me?"

Holy shit, how in the hell did he do that? While I was winning, his intervention dragged me out of my head immediately, or at least sent my thoughts spiralling in another direction. I nodded and bit my bottom lip, wanting to throw my arms around him, letting him know how fucking perfect he was. Instead, I held back and nodded before glancing at Diesel. Concern washed my brother's features, but it didn't last long as I grinned at him. It was genuine and big. He glanced at Mace and me before standing, leaning over the table, and planting a kiss on my head.

When he stood, he looked down at me, looking torn, bemused, and slightly pale. "Yes, I have. Definitely get one." He nodded and walked away, leaving me to catch my jaw as it dropped open and I stared at Cole. He looked at me and then burst out in laughter.

As he stood, a deep laugh still spilling forth, he threw me a wink. "He's right. Definitely get one."

I wanted the ground to open up and swallow me whole. For the love of God, why did these men say such shit to me? Mace's hand clamped behind the back of my neck, and I angled to look at him.

"Something I need to know?"

Then I grinned, my own laugh breaking free. "Not right now, no." I continued smiling as Mace led me out. The guys had always taken too much delight in winding me up and embarrassing me, but that had stopped in recent years. This had been the first time they had done so since I left uni. The realisation constricted my heart. I leaned closer to Mace's side, happiness a welcome sensation.

It looked like I would be shopping for a cock ring as soon as possible.

Chapter Thirteen

MACE

Earlier

When I'd seen the smug look on Nox's face, it had taken every ounce of willpower I had not to vault over the table and rip his throat out. Somehow, I'd reined in my pulsating anger and sat opposite him. I just wanted to get it over and done with as quickly as possible, reach the bottom of this pile of shit, and head home to Lena.

After fifteen minutes of him talking crap about inconsequential bullshit, I finally broke, demanding he spit out whatever the fuck he wanted to say to me. I knew someone would be listening to the conversation, and that didn't exactly sit well, but protocol was protocol and there was nothing I could do about it.

He'd pulled a piece of paper out of his pants and pushed it over to me. The scrunched-up paper held the two words "O'Leary" and "McKenny." Tearing the piece of paper up, I put the torn fragments in my pocket, my brain working overtime. O'Leary had been one of my own. I'd trusted him as my second. Yeah, some bastard had spread the intel about our raid into the wind, but the thought of it being O'Leary didn't feel right. McKenny's name made me pause for a different reason.

Since my first run-in with the smarmy fucker a few years back, and more recently with the whole shitstorm surrounding my dad, not once had there been a link between Riots and McKenny. While I hadn't been looking for a link, there was no way I would have missed any connection. Not only that, I didn't even know McKenny back then. It was only four years or so earlier that his name raised alarms and I'd opened an investigation on him. But my chat with him in the diner had planted a seed, one that Nox had just fertilised.

"You got anything else to say?" He'd given me the names, but I still had no clue as to why he had.

"Not at the moment." He grinned, a full, sardonic grin that I wanted to wipe off his face with my fist.

I stood, wanting to get the hell out of there. Nothing good would come from spending too long in the presence of scum. At the door, I knocked twice but didn't turn back when Nox called my name.

"I hear you've got a new piece."

I froze but refused to bite.

"She as good as Abigail? 'Cause you know, I've met the lovely Lena. Heard she's a bit of a whack job."

Clenching my jaw, I gripped the door handle and pulled hard as soon as I heard the lock release. In the open doorway, I turned, my stare fixed on him, my eyes stern. "You know what I heard?" His grin stayed in place, seemingly unimpressed. "Heard you were a virgin in here." His eyes twitched slightly, his only tell that he was thrown by my words. "That can end tonight, fucker." I backed out, pulling the door closed, and headed towards the security door.

Fuck. I could make it happen too. The temptation was there, beckoning me to destroy a part of Nox. As the first security gate beeped, I relaxed my aching jaw, and continued to pick up my belongings so I could get the fuck out of there before I changed my mind and turned back.

Once on my bike, I summoned calm to wash over me. While I didn't have a lot to go on, the two names were a start. Even if they ended up being bullshit, Nox had given them to me for a reason. I just had to work out what that was.

Knowing it was a long drive back to the club where I'd pick up Lena, I hoped it was enough for me to settle my nerves and my anger, but just ten kilometres out, the thought of Nox, or anyone, getting to Lena continued to surface. Glancing at my watch, I saw it was eight. Smiling, I signalled and headed south towards the one place where I would get my shit together enough to not worry about Lena watching me struggle.

#####

I stroked baby Abi's cheek as soon as I'd placed her down in her cot. I'd managed to get in a quick cuddle before her bedtime, which effectively helped to centre me and ease out the tension I was holding on to. Looking down at her sleeping form, I wondered what it would be like to reach the point of having my own kids one day. Lena would look fucking hot round and pregnant with our baby. The thought didn't even make me flinch. Now that I had her in my life for real, rather than lusting after her from afar and convincing myself I was bad news for her, I had no doubt she was the one.

"Love you, princess." I placed a kiss on her cheek before heading out to the kitchen. Liam was loading the dishwasher while Jo sat at the table, her legs up on the chair in front of her, nursing a glass of wine.

"Thank you," Jo said, offering me a smile.

"All good. I just needed my fix before I headed home."

"Rough day?" Liam asked as he closed the dishwasher door and switched it on.

"You could say that," I admitted. "I went to see Nox."

Liam walked past me, removed Jo's feet to sit, and repositioned them on his lap. "Shit. What did you go and do that for?"

I sighed and headed over to the fridge to grab a beer. Cracking one open, I took a long pull before resting against the workbench and facing Liam and Jo. "He's trying to work out some deal for a prison change and wanted to see me as part of that deal." I didn't even consider holding anything back from either of them. As a family, we'd been through so much together that I'd since learned—courtesy of Jo giving me no choice but to accept my past and face my present—that not sharing anything that potentially impacted them was not okay.

"They won't let him out, will they?" Jo asked, her eyes wide and her cheeks flushed. "They better bloody not, or I swear to—"

"No." I laughed, interrupting her tirade. "There's no chance of early release. But he's exchanging info for a bed at a low-security prison."

"About Abigail?" Liam asked, his frown deepening with his question.

I nodded. "Yeah. He gave me a couple of names. One of which was McKenny." I didn't tell them about my previous run-in with him prior to my meeting with Nox.

"Get the fuck out!" Jo slammed her glass down, spilling the contents on the table, and surprising me when the glass didn't shatter.

"What's that bastard have to do with anything?" Liam forced out. He was all too aware of McKenny. As a competitor to our architect business, in which I was a silent partner, McKenny had pulled countless stunts, even before his shady involvement in drugs that had involved our dad while Jo had still been pregnant.

"Not sure yet. I'll find out." Liam nodded, knowing I was true to my word. "Kay, I'm out."

"To Lena?" Jo asked with a smirk.

"Yep." I turned and threw my empty bottle in the recycling bin.

"Invite her by this Sunday. Liam will put the barbie on."

"Sure." I offered her a genuine smile and then looked at Liam who threw me a smirk. "Look after my princess for me."

I headed out, the heaviness weighing me down sitting a little lighter as I made my way to Deadwood's bar. It lifted even higher still when I overheard a clearly drunk Lena saying how hard I made her scream. I didn't really give a shit about what Cole had previously said to her. She was mine, and now that she was straddling my bike, pushed up tightly against my back, I was dead set on making good on my promise. I was convinced she'd thought I was joking, but since hearing her soft groan at my threat, I was eager to make it a reality.

I was never one for games in or out of bed. I fucked hard, was skilled with my tongue and talented with my fingers, but there was something about the thought of my palm against her arse, leaving a slight sting as she writhed in pleasure, that had me willing to break that control for her. Fuck, I'd do anything to see her come undone and make her happy.

Pulling up outside my house, I kicked down my stand and removed my helmet, balancing it on my knee as I held out an arm to help Lena off the bike. Once she dismounted, I assisted with removing her helmet, and pressed my lips against her mouth as soon as it was free. She fell into the kiss immediately, a content sigh escaping her sweet lips. Stopping the kiss, I swung my leg over the bike and straightened, before grabbing hold of her waist and pulling her close. "Inside. Strip and wait for me on our bed."

I stared down at her hard when she bit her bottom lip, still frozen on the spot.

"You need to be on your knees. Your arse is mine, baby." Her eyes widened and her chest rose noticeably with the hitch of her breath. "Go on in. I'm going to put my bike away and grab a quick shower. You've got five minutes." It would be the quickest shower in fucking history, but with the flush of her cheeks evident in the soft outdoor lights, there was no way I could hold back any longer.

Nodding, she darted away from me, her sexy giggle trailing behind her as she unlocked the door and headed inside. My cock strained against my zipper in anticipation. Quickly locking away my bike and stowing the helmets, I headed to the main shower rather than the en suite. If I saw her arse raised and waiting for me, I didn't think I'd be able to clean, and after spending hours on the road and time with the fucker Nox, I needed to scrub away the day.

After the quickest shower I was sure I'd ever had, I strolled naked to our room. While Lena hadn't officially moved in, she had enough of her

belongings around the house that it wouldn't be long before we made it official. I paused in the open doorway, my cock standing at attention at the sight greeting me.

Perfection.

Relieved I was already naked, I moved behind her, still standing at the end of the bed. "Spread your legs," I demanded. There was that hitch in her breath again, and fuck if the sound didn't make me throb with need. She willingly spread her legs and tilted her head to look back over her shoulder at me. Need washed over her features. "Are you ready for me, baby?"

She nodded, biting that damn bottom lip again. I stepped closer to the bed, my knees pressed against the mattress, and I reached out to her. My fingers found her wet and so ready that I easily slipped two digits into her waiting pussy. She leaned into my touch and gently rocked. "That good, baby?"

She nodded once more. This time, her head bent forward as she took the pleasure I promised. Still working her with my fingers, I kept pace as I knelt on the bed. I then leaned over and pressed a kiss to her arse before I nipped at the roundness of her backside. She shuddered, continuing to move, no longer as steady or as controlled as before.

I repositioned myself to allow her to continue to ride my fingers while stretching a finger out to rub her clit. Her gasp became a scream of pleasure as my free hand made contact with her arse. "Fuck, baby, that's hot. Do you want it again?" She nodded. "I need a yes, Lena."

"Yes," she panted. "Again."

I pulled my fingers out, positioning my cock at her entrance. This time, when my hand smacked down on her cheek, I slammed into her. I watched the red mark appear on her skin and leaned forward, planting a kiss on her back. "What you do to me, baby," I whispered against her skin. I couldn't do gentle or soft. I needed her so fucking bad that I was sure I was going to blow within seconds. I wrapped a hand around to her clit and pressed down, rubbing circles against her tender flesh.

"Come for me, Lena, or do you want my hand on your arse again?"

A throaty laugh escaped her, making me grin. "I'm going to come, but hell, your hand on me like that... fuck, Mace," she gasped out the words as I pounded into her.

"Happy to oblige." I gave one swift smack, not as hard this time. She was already on the edge and didn't need much to send her over. With her

pussy contracting around my cock and her scream filling the room, I rocked against her, my eyes flicking between my red handprint and my cock entering her. Heat and lightness spread through my body with the upsurge of my release. Finally it hit, my balls tightening and my cum entering her. She shook against me as her scream faded and I finally stilled.

Sure I was going to collapse from how hard I'd come, I grabbed her waist and dragged her to the side with me still planted inside her. We lay still and silent for a few beats, our breathing slowing.

"Have you ever—?"

"No, baby. Never before." I could imagine the wheels turning in her brain.

She sighed against me. "Me neither." I didn't need to hear her words to know that already. I kissed her head briefly.

"It was fucking amazing." She laughed, causing her to clamp around my cock. I groaned and attempted to hold her still. "Don't laugh. Bloody hell, you trying to kill me?"

My words had the opposite effect and pulled another deep laugh from her. Shit, I was sure my cock was being eaten. Death by Venus Cocktrap! I shared my thoughts, forcing her laughter to spill forth in hysterical gasps. Pulling out swiftly before her cocktrap did some serious damage, I flipped Lena onto her back. Tears of laughter spilled down her cheeks.

"Fuck, baby, I love you. Laugh like that for me every day." The words were unplanned but the truth.

With a smile still on her face, so wide I was sure she was getting sore cheeks, her laughter began to settle. She lifted her hand to my cheek then. "Keep giving me something to laugh and smile about and I'll see what I can do." She lifted up and pressed her lips against mine before pulling back slightly. "I love you, too." Her words were clear and confident. She rested her head back on the pillow, and I searched her eyes, trying to capture this moment.

"Always," I eventually answered before getting out of bed and tugging her with me. "I need another shower. You can lather me up." I threw her a wink and laughed when she smacked my arse.

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"Anything else I need to know before I head out?" Kid asked. He was working on a security detail for me, heading out to Perth for a couple of weeks.

"Nope. I think you're good. You should have everything you need. Just try to blend a bit, yeah?" I grinned, knowing that for the group of guys who worked for me, while they scrubbed up well in suits when the occasion called for it, blending in didn't come naturally. With ink a-plenty, various stages of beard growth, and often oil-stained jeans, they kicked off a general bad-arse persona. Throw in the cuts for those who rode with Deadwood, and they stuck out something fierce, especially when escorting clients in tourist areas, which thank fuck rarely happened. Kid in thongs and board shorts was too much of a headfuck to visualise.

It always surprised me the nature and complexity of our clients and details. We handled everything from more hard-core shit like retrieval, as in leave the country to search for and rescue abducted kids, to offering protection detail to groups of businessmen or rich kids. Then there was delivery of goods, of the non-illegal variety. I'd almost stumbled upon the hard-core cases, through a friend of mine, Jenson, who was a British ex-Marine. I had no idea at the time why he didn't go it alone. It was his own team he ran with after all, but I'd already built up a reputation for myself, plus I had contacts all across Australia, which helped with securing work. I was in the process of making Jenson a partner. Having him and his cash on board would mean we could up our provisions and resources significantly. I had no grand plans to go corporate, or to take on many more guys, but joining forces would mean we could work faster and safer, especially on high-risk jobs.

Kid was on escort detail; not playing babysitter as much as watching out for the daughter of a friend of a friend. It was more of a favour than anything, one that I discounted heavily to make possible. The daughter was making the trip to Perth by car. I grinned at Kid. Being without his bike for two weeks would suck balls, but he'd agreed to help me out, with Diesel giving the go-ahead as he saw it as an opportunity to meet up with a charter out west.

"Just be sure to take regular stops, yeah, and try not to scare the poor girl."

Kid rolled his eyes. "If she tries to put pop shit on the radio, you know there's a chance I may put her on a Greyhound and just tail it, right?"

I snorted. "Just grab the file and get out of here. You've got a couple of hours, so go finish packing your stuff and give me regular updates."

Nodding, he stood and reached out to me, clasping my hand. "Thanks, Kid. You're doing me a good turn on this one."

"Yeah, and don't think I won't collect." He threw the words over his shoulder, heading out of my office and towards Lena. I watched as she stepped out of her area to give him a hug. There weren't many men I could handle touching her. Kid fell into that category. I paused, feeling guilty that I was relieved she wasn't in the habit of touching people at all. While I wanted her to have the confidence to do whatever the fuck she wanted, the thought of her being open to touch and becoming tactile with everyone who wasn't on my "okay to touch" list had me clenching my jaw.

Lena planted a kiss on Kid's cheek and waved at him before glancing at me and stepping towards my room. Her smile slipped when her eyes roamed my face. "What is it?" She came into the room, stopping directly before me.

"Just realising I can be a piece of shit is all," I admitted.

Her brows furrowed and she half laughed, no doubt trying to work out if I were serious or not. "Care to tell me why exactly?"

"Not really." I shrugged. Her brows lifted, and she threw me a look intended to wear me down. I sighed in defeat, feeling even more like a pussy by barely waiting four seconds before giving in. I quickly explained to her my "okay to touch" list and my issues, followed by my guilt.

Her smile spread to a grin and she stepped into my space, her arms wrapping around my shoulders. "It's sweet, in a ridiculously possessive way. Don't feel guilty about it. I have my own list for you, you know."

I quirked my brows. "You do, huh?"

"Yep."

"Going to share that with me?"

"Nope."

I laughed loudly, enjoying the way her eyes lit up when she smiled. "Do you fancy a quickie?"

She rolled her eyes as she continued smirking at me. "No can do, boss. You have to head over to Cain Donald's in fifteen to go over the new security specs."

"I can be quick." I wriggled my brows in offer.

She planted a palm on my chest and pushed herself away. "As much as you're a charmer, big guy, I don't really fancy you racing to the finish line anytime soon. You can wait till tonight and do me slowly." Her words

ended with a laugh as she walked out the room and left me groaning and with a hard-on.

"Fine. I'll call one of the boys in to hang out while I'm gone."

Lena paused in front of the door leading to her workspace and then turned and faced me. "There's no need for that. I'm good." A tentative smile appeared on her lips, her nerves not as well hidden as I was sure she intended.

Stepping away from my desk, I walked to my open doorway and leaned against the frame. "Is that right?"

She nodded, exhaled a small breath and said, "Yes. I've been thinking about it for a while now. I think I'm ready. I'll stay in my workstation, and if there's a random walk-in by an unknown, I'll make sure my phone is in my hand just in case I can't handle it. I want to do this, Mace."

My heart actually fucking ached at her strength and her nerves. I wanted to swoop her up and beg her to stop pushing herself. Pressure caused her stress levels to peak. It seemed crazy she would be doing that to herself on purpose.

"I need this," she reiterated, bending my resolve once more.

Closing my eyes briefly, I sighed in defeat before stepping into her space. Looking down at her, I placed two fingers under her chin and lifted. Our eyes connected. "If there's even a moment of hesitation, of nerves, call Jase and flick the door lock. You get me?" Jase was one of my guys. He was on call for me today so would be around if I needed him.

She nodded quickly, lips curving. "Thank you. I'll be fine. I promise."

I narrowed my eyes at her. "You know you don't have to prove yourself to anyone, me especially, right?"

Audibly, she gulped, her eyes misting with tears. "This is for me. I want to be strong and well."

"You're both of those things already, baby. Do you not see how fucking amazing you are, how fucking together you are? Shit, woman, your strength is enough to bring me to my knees." As I spoke, tears spilled down her cheeks. I wiped them away, hating to see her upset. "Don't cry, Lena."

A snorting laugh burst free as her tears continued to fall. "I'm not sad." She sniffed with a watery grin. "I just don't necessarily see myself as you see me."

My face fell at her words. Fuck, I was letting her down if she couldn't see how fucking spectacular she was. In my one serious relationship with

Abigail, I'd screwed up majorly on more than one occasion. I couldn't allow that to happen again.

"Hey"—she reached out and cupped my cheek—"what's that look for? You know you've made all of this, my life, everything, so much better, right?"

I clenched my jaw, not sure how to respond without sounding like a pussy.

"Right?" Her brows dipped, frustration replacing her tears and smile. I wanted to believe her more than anything. She had changed in many ways for sure, her confidence and comfort levels especially. I also knew her panic attacks were less frequent, but that didn't stop me from overthinking shit, wondering if I was really enough to make her happy. "I swear to God, Mace, if you don't stop mulling over whatever shit's going through your head right now, I'll take those handcuffs you keep threatening me with, secure you, and spank you so goddamn hard, you'll be shooting your load in the matter of seconds." Her face immediately split into a grin, a flush spreading across her cheeks.

Lightness and laughter rose to my chest, spilling out into a loud snort. "Did you really just threaten to spank me?" My laugh then boomed into the room, lifting my chest and causing Lena to grimace as she failed miserably at looking threatening while attempting to hold back her laughter. I tugged her to my body, her soft curves pressing against me. "You know, one day I'm going to marry you, right?"

Her laughter stopped, and her eyes widened in surprise. My own laughter simmered, but I still smiled, loving the shock I'd created. "Maybe when you have my ring on your finger, I'll let you play with the cuffs and do just that." I kissed her hard, throwing my need and the truth of my words behind every stroke of my tongue and movement of my lips against hers.

"You have ten minutes, right?" she said when she broke our kiss.

I nodded, my gaze roaming over her swollen lips.

"Good." She pushed me back into my office, kicking the door closed behind us, before lifting her dress over her head. "Let's see how quickly you can make me scream."

I grinned and quickly stripped down, wanting nothing more than to accept her challenge.

Chapter Fourteen

LENA

I sat at my desk in the quiet office, not even pretending to focus and work. How could I after Mace's declaration? My breath had all but rushed out of me when he mentioned marriage. There was no doubt or hesitancy when I'd told Mace I loved him, and there still wasn't, but the thought of marriage left my head spinning. I had no idea what to do with that information.

Without a doubt, Mace was serious. He didn't mince words and he didn't talk bullshit. But still, a little heads-up would have been good. Though I wasn't quite sure how something as monumental as marriage could be casually woven into a conversation with subtlety and without one hell of a reaction.

The fact that he'd followed up by ripping a mind-blowing orgasm from me before rushing out to his meeting had pretty much rendered me incapable of concentration. I sighed, looking at the empty mailbox, willing something to arrive to distract me. My power of electrical manipulation not kicking in, I stood and headed to the back storage area. There were still boxes in there I had yet to tackle. It seemed the time had arrived for me to fight with the layers of dust and years-old paperwork that wouldn't simply go away.

Wedge the door open so I could see the front door, I pulled a box from the second-to-top shelf, dragging it out and grimacing when it dropped to the floor with a thud. Kneeling, I removed the lid and started working through the files, making piles for storage, filing, and digital transfer. I'd become a whiz at the scanner in recent weeks as I continued to delve through Mace's chaotic order.

A buzz alerted me that someone was about to enter. Standing quickly, I dusted myself off and headed into the reception area. I smiled when I saw Janie at the door.

"Hey," I called as I let myself out from behind the desk to greet her with a kiss on her cheek. "What are you doing here?"

"Mace said you may be up for lunch."

I scoffed lightly, a smile on my lips. "I just bet he did."

She grinned back at me, not a shred of guilt on her delicate features. "He called to say you were alone and could probably do with an hour's

escape."

Warmth spread in my chest. I had no idea if I was meant to be irritated by Mace interfering, but I wasn't. He cared, a lot. I grasped the thought and promised myself to always remember the small gestures of kindness and love he showed me. They were so much more than the bigger things. While I loved flowers and sexy lingerie, these moments were more precious and thoughtful.

"Is there anywhere you go with Mace that you're comfortable with?"

I nodded, knowing just the place. "Let me just set the machine and wash the dust off my hands, then I'm all yours." I carried out those tasks quickly and picked up my bag, setting the alarm as I locked up.

"Do you want me to drive?" Janie asked.

"Sure, thanks." Walking side by side with her, my step faltered and I stopped, glancing at the car across the road. Jase. I shook my head and offered him a wave. Bloody Mace and his protectiveness admittedly got me hot and bothered. Having Jase there, I knew, wasn't a question of my ability to cope. It was more to do with Mace trying and struggling to let go. I'd forgive him, but I'd make it my mission to reach the point where he'd be able to trust that I was safe.

"Who's that?" Janie asked, opening her door and climbing inside.

I got in and secured my seat belt. "Jase. He works for Mace sometimes."

"He's hot. Damn. Is he on protection detail or something?"

"Or something," I answered. "Mace is being his domineering self. Plus, there's some stuff going on with Nox, so I know he's extra cautious."

"You okay with all that?" She pulled out.

"Yeah." I shrugged. "Trick's is good. I'm happy to eat there," I added. She nodded. "After being around the club so much, I know a couple of things. One, there's no point arguing with a growly man, cut or not."

Janie laughed. "And two?"

"I know that sometimes shit gets real and serious very fast, you know. Diesel's also kept me as far away from club business as he could, but that doesn't mean I don't know what goes on. Plus, the Nox thing and him knowing Mace and I are together, I'm not stupid enough to ignore that information. It doesn't mean I think anything's going to happen, nor does it mean I won't accept any detail he puts on me. It's not worth the stress involved."

Janie glanced at me, her brows raised and a smile playing on her lips. "Wow. That serious, huh? You and Mace. Does he know you love him?"

"Yes," I answered immediately. Janie was so bloody easy to talk to, useful considering her profession, and I was so pleased she'd refused to counsel me so we were able to build upon our growing friendship.

"And?"

I laughed. "He told me he wanted to marry me."

"Get the fudge out!" She turned quickly to look at me, making the car swerve. She quickly adjusted the steering wheel. "Erm... sorry." She giggled.

"Bloody hell. Eyes on the road, Janie. I damn well near shit myself." I risked a glance over my shoulder and saw Jase behind us. He shook his head. I waved at him, grinning. "Not like now or anything, but he said one day he was marrying me."

Indicating left, Janie idled, waiting for a gap in the traffic. When one appeared, she pulled into the carpark. "So he told you, did a whole sexy growly demand thing?"

"Pretty much," I said, amused.

"Sounds about right. Collins said pretty much the same thing to me."

Unclipping my belt, I spun around to face her. "Shit, you're getting married?"

"Ha! No chance." She shook her head as she switched off the engine, unclipped her belt, and stepped out of the car. I followed suit. "Bloody man all but demanded I marry him. I told him to fuck off."

I covered my mouth with my hand. They'd spilt up?

"Right before I rode his face and told him to put his smart mouth to better use." Her laughter was loud and infectious as she opened the door to the diner. "Where's best for you?" she asked over her shoulder.

I grinned, soft chuckles spilling forth. I had half a heart to feel sorry for Collins, but he could hack it. Those men needed handling at times and it seemed Janie had that covered. "Over here's good." I led her to one of the three booths I was comfortable in. It was near the back door, a viable exit. I faced the main entrance and eased into the booth comfortably. I knew lots of the staff's faces and names, as well as the complete layout of the place. When Mace had insisted the manager give me a guided tour one night when they'd closed, I'd been mortified as well as so touched and grateful. Because

of that, I felt at ease, so it was worth the momentary discomfort for that freedom.

"So you don't want to marry him?" They'd been together for over a year, and while that shouldn't mean marriage had to be the next step, it surprised me that she wasn't interested.

"One day I will, but I've yet to find balance, you know?" I looked at her, confused. She sighed. "I'm sorry, I know Diesel is your brother and he's a good guy, and I'm happy Collins has such a close-knit family, but he lives and breathes the club. I just don't know where I fit in with it all."

That I understood. Deadwood brothers were tight and could be a bit overbearing as a family at times. Janie rarely was at the club, but I'd always thought that was more to do with her working so damn hard. It appeared to be more than that.

"Have you talked to Collins about it?"

"Yes, but he thinks I'm reading too much into everything, which just pisses me off rather than reassures me."

"Why don't you come and hang out one night when I'm there? They're not that bad, you know. They're a good group. Perhaps you just need to get to know them a bit better." I looked down at the menu, trying to make up my mind quickly as I saw the waitress making her way over to our table.

"Maybe," she answered. "Is it too early for beer?"

I laughed just as the waitress stepped up. "Hey, Lena, what can I get you and your friend today?"

I smiled over at Macy. "Just a chicken wrap and strawberry milkshake for me, please."

She took down my order and threw me a wink before looking at Janie.

"I'll have the same, but throw in some fries with mine, please. Thanks."

"No problem, ladies." She walked off to sort our order and I returned my focus to Janie.

"I can be there this Saturday night if you want. There's nothing organised, so it'll just be the guys playing pool and talking shit, no doubt. Plus, it won't be a late night as we're heading to Mace's brother's for lunch on the Sunday." I'd met him just once before when he and Jo came around for dinner one night. He seemed like a really good guy. There were some crazy resemblances between him and Mace, especially since Mace had

shaved off his beard. Jo had been a whirlwind, pretty much the same as our first meeting. Plus, she'd been pretty cool.

"Liam, right?"

I nodded.

"Have you met him?"

"Yes, once for dinner. He's a decent guy."

My heart constricted at all I'd learned about Mace growing up and their parents, and what had happened to Jo. I'd heard gossip when it had all happened, but Mace had since shared the whole story with me, including about his childhood, Jo's attack, and his dad's release. In the brief moment I'd met Jo, I'd already known she was an incredible woman, but surviving all she had, hell, I admired the hell out of her. Jo's story was as horrific as it was heartbreaking. You'd never think that her past held such devastation.

It made me think about Mace and what he'd said about strength. Jo was all strength and sass, but I was sure it hadn't always been that way. With Mace beside me and the constant support of my family, I truly believed that I'd reach the point where I'd take ownership of my past and my emotions, and embrace the strength badge Mace seemed sure I deserved.

"Hey, where'd you go?"

My eyes darted to Janie. Her head was tilted to the side, her straw poised by her mouth. I hadn't even seen our drinks arrive. I shook my head and smiled.

"Just thinking about Mace and family, and stuff, you know. Life's getting better." I picked up my drink and sucked on my straw, enjoying the delicious flavours when the liquid touched my tongue.

"That it is." Jani held out her glass for me to clink my own against. I did so happily. "And you're right, it is getting better. Just be sure that you know no one is responsible for that change other than you. Don't get me wrong, I know Mace makes you happy and no doubt makes your vagina scream in pleasure"—I snorted, not denying the truth of her words—"but they're just influences that help with the happy, you know? You're the reason why you're working, why you're getting independent, why you're able to sit in a diner in public."

I glanced around, allowing her words to sink in. Pride bubbled in my chest.

"You did all that. You made a decision to accept help and support, and to face your past head-on. You, Lena. You're fucking amazing."

I laughed loudly. It had only been recently that I'd heard Janie swear so I gasped for breath from the shock and amusement—it seems she was finally comfortable enough with me to let her guard down for good.

She threw me a shit-eating grin. "This bloody biker family of yours is a bad influence." She paused, both of us thanking the waitress when our food was placed in front of us. "And yes, I'll come by Saturday night. I need to make an effort to see if I can find the balance I need." She plucked a fry off her plate and bit into it. "I love the idiot after all."

"Ain't that the truth," I agreed, picking up my wrap and proceeding to shovel it into my mouth.

Once we'd finished up, I passed Jase a sandwich and a drink on the way out of the diner, telling Janie I'd catch up with her on Saturday. Jase said thanks just as he took a big bite. I sat in the passenger seat of Jase's car.

He quirked his brows at me, swallowing his mouthful of food. "Going somewhere?" he asked before taking a sip of his juice.

I shrugged. "You were going with me anyway, right?"

He nodded and started the car.

"You could have come in for food, you know."

His eyes remained on the road, always vigilant, occasionally scanning the passing streets and flicking to the rear-view mirror. "It's all good. I have better vision out on the street."

"When we get back in the office, you can come in though. I know you're here now, so lurking is no longer necessary."

He threw me an unimpressed glance. "I wasn't lurking."

"Ha! What would you call it then?" I sassed.

"Doing my job."

I sighed. Jase was a good guy. I didn't know that much about him other than he was ex-military. He was built and had a panty-melting smile. But I'd only seen it a couple of times. He was on the serious side, but Mace trusted him, and despite his sometimes grave aura, I actually felt really comfortable around him. "I know you were. Thank you." I threw him the olive branch and was surprised when I received a quick wink and a slight smile.

When we pulled up outside the building, Jase's growly voice startled me. "Stay in the car." I clamped my hand on to the door handle, wondering at the mood change. I didn't have time to question him before he jumped out, locked the doors behind him, and headed to the front door.

I released my seat belt and leaned closer to the window to peer out. When I saw him open the door without using a key, I grabbed my phone and called Mace.

"Hey, ba—"

"I think someone broke into the office."

"Where are you right now?"

"In Jase's car. He locked the doors and just went in. The door was unlocked. I swear to God, I locked it and set the alarm before I left."

I heard movement and the roar of his engine. "Just stay put, yeah, and call Diesel. He's closer than I am. Fuck. Just call him, okay. And do not get out of the car. You hear me, Lena?"

"Got it. Just be safe and don't break your damn neck speeding."

He snorted. "Love you." He hung up.

My adrenaline surged. I'd been anxious enough to call Mace, but his reaction, the steel and concern in his voice, caused my heart to pound heavily. I glanced at the door, still not seeing Jase, or anything for that matter. I had no idea how he'd even known something was wrong. *Ten, nine, eight*. I could do this. Mace was on his way. It was probably only a stupid break-in. I would not lose it. *Seven, six, five*. I hit Call on Diesel's name.

After three long rings that I was sure were in reality very short, he answered. I didn't give him time to speak. "I need you at the office." I attempted to keep my voice calm and neutral, but knew I'd rushed the words out. He hollered out to someone in the background, the sound of feet hitting the ground reaching my ears.

"I'll be there," he finally said, the sound of his engine starting the last thing I heard before the call ended.

As concerned as I was for Jase, there was no damn way I was getting out of the car. Was I chickenshit? Hell yes, plus Mace would have my arse. If something was going down, then there weren't any secret ninja moves that I knew. One thing I was not was a foolhardy woman who went flying into danger trying to save the day. Hell to the no!

I looked at my phone, debating whether to call the police, but Mace had said to call Diesel instead. Since Mace used to be one of the boys in blue, I trusted his judgement in this. I just needed to see Jase and wished he'd get his arse back out of the damn office so I could shout at him for taking so long and scaring the crap out of me.

I clung to my phone like a lifeline, my nose now pressed against the window. I gasped in relief when the door opened and Jase stepped out. His face, however, was grim. He opened the door and leaned in. "You call Mace yet?" I nodded. "Good."

"Diesel's on his way here too," I added. "What's going on?"

He looked at me, his eyes unwavering while he seemed to contemplate what to say. Finally, he spoke. "There's just a message for Mace."

"What sort of message?" I made to step out of the car, but his voice halted me.

"No, stay. I don't want you in there."

I glanced up at him, my brows drawn in confusion.

"Just stay here and wait for your brother, okay?"

Frustrated, I reluctantly agreed. There was clearly much more going on, or else I wouldn't be held hostage in his car. "What else is there?" I had no idea what he meant by a message.

He made to speak but paused when the thrum of bikes reached our ears. We looked to the road to spot Diesel, Cole, and Collins heading towards us. "Just stay put a minute." My mouth opened to speak, desperately wanting to challenge the order, but his "Please, Lena," had me grumbling and kept my arse planted in the seat.

Jase then closed the door and headed to Diesel, who signalled to Collins to stay put and Cole to go with him to the office. I risked opening the window, relieved it still worked despite the engine not being on. "Hey."

Collins moved to the car and leaned against it. He offered me a tight smile. "You okay?"

I nodded. "Did Jase say what was in there, what had happened?"

"No, just needed Diesel to see something." He pulled out a cigarette and lit it, inhaling deeply. He released the smoke as he spoke. "Where's Mace?"

"He was at a meeting about twenty minutes or so away."

"So he'll be here in five then, yeah?" He laughed.

I pushed out air from my lungs with a small laugh. "Probably."

"You sure you're okay, Lena? You're pale."

I really was okay, all things considered. I was able to breathe and think. I didn't feel the need to cower and hide. I was totally freaked out and beginning to imagine the worst, but I was handling it. "I'm fine, really. My imagination is just beginning to work overtime is all." I glanced at the

office door, but it remained closed, and then I looked back at Collins. "If someone has shit in my filing cabinet or anything, there'll be hell to pay," I half joked, trying to relieve the tension.

"If there is, there's no fucking way I'm cleaning that up."

I grinned. "I had lunch with Janie today." Focusing on something else would stop me thinking about dead cats being strung up. *Shit, my head is so damn screwed.* I shook the thought away.

"Yeah?" He feigned indifference, but by the slight shift in his position, I knew he listened intently.

"Yeah. I talked her into coming to the club Saturday night for drinks."

That got his attention. He turned fully to look at me. "How'd the fuck you manage that?"

"I have my ways." One of them was I was full of shit, but he didn't need to know that.

He looked impressed and possibly a bit perplexed too. "She say anything about why she's coming?"

I offered a kind smile and placed my hand on his. "She wants to get to know the club better. I think it helps that we've become friends. So thanks for making that happen." I meant it. There were plenty of women around the club, most of them friendly, but they tended to keep their distance, especially after they quickly realised that they couldn't get close to Diesel through me. So having a friend was nice. I'd missed having a girlfriend to chat to.

Collins leaned down and planted a kiss on the top of my head. "Thanks, Lena." Just then, I heard the familiar rumble of Mace's bike. My body reacted immediately, a flush creeping against my skin and my face lighting with a smile. I thought I was doing well before, but with Mace so close, my world became lighter.

"Can I get out?" I didn't want to cause Collins unnecessary hassle with my brother.

He nodded, opening the door. "Just promise no going inside, yeah?"

I agreed and jumped out the car, watching Mace get closer. He was before me in an instant. His engine cut out, and he swung his leg off his bike, tearing off his helmet. I stepped into his arms, a smile on my face, and inhaled. He leaned back to look at me. His eyes were dark and frown lines creased his forehead. Rather than saying anything, he pressed his lips

against mine. It was hard, possessive, and all too short, leaving me gasping for breath and ready to pounce on him for more.

He flicked his gaze behind me to Collins, reminding me why we were there and that my lusty thoughts would have to wait. "They inside?"

"Yeah, said she needed to stay outside."

Mace nodded and then returned his gaze to me. "Can you get back in the car, please, baby? I'll let you know what's going on as soon as I know."

I blinked slowly and bobbed my head, stepping back to the car and getting inside. I hated it, but I understood it, so like the good woman I was, I fixed a smile in place and kept my silence. For the moment.

Chapter Fifteen

MACE

Hearing her voice as she'd cut me off, I was sure my heart had stopped. When it started again, pain sliced through my chest, leaving a raw and stinging ache behind. It was the fear evident in her voice, despite the calm she attempted, that played on repeat as I'd sped through traffic to get to her.

I knew she was safe. That one thought kept me from losing my shit completely. She was in a locked car and Jase was taking care of her. I trusted he would protect her should it come to that. When I'd pulled up next to his car and Lena stepped out, plastering herself against my body, I felt able to breathe again.

It was now time to find out what the fuck was going on. When Collins told me about Jase demanding she stay outside, I knew it was more than a break-in, more than kids seeing an opportunity to steal shit. There was no way they could have gotten past my alarm, for a start.

Looking back once I heard the car door close, checking Lena was secure inside, I pulled the door to the building open. I expected a trashed room so I paused in the doorway when everything seemed normal. No broken glass, no empty drawers, no shredded paperwork. Glancing around, my eyes landed on Diesel, Cole, and Jase. They stood in my open doorway, all looking at me. Fury radiated from Diesel, his face red and mean, his eyes and fists tight.

When I stepped forward, all three backed up from the door, allowing me through. I stood in the open doorway, my eyes raking the room, quickly falling upon the cause of Diesel's anger. Photographs littered my desk, a knife jammed through one in the centre of the wooden top. I edged forward, already catching a glimpse of some of the images. Lena's form, some midecstasy, some of her naked body, most midfucking covered the space. I spotted my bed in a few, even saw hers, but what worried me the most was one in this very room, taken just over an hour ago. She was bent over my desk naked while I was behind her midthrust. Any other time I was sure my cock would have been hard as my gaze raked over the images, but there was no chance of that, not with this.

My eyes travelled to the knife and the image it speared. It was a picture of Abigail, one of her laughing, one that had been packed away in a

box in my garage. "What the fuck!" I roared. "I want to know who the fuck did this and I want them gone." I didn't need to turn to know all three were near the door. "How the fuck did they get past the security system?" The system was programmed to send a warning straight to my phone and e-mail if tampered with.

Diesel's voice filtered through the tense room. "Is this Nox?"

I turned to look at him and nodded. "I have no fucking doubt that shitfucker is behind this." The question was why, though? He'd given me intel, whether false or not. True, I was all over the Riots members when I had the chance, but no longer being a cop, it wasn't like I had any real power to do anything. Yes, I tried to screw with them and made sure deals went bad whenever I got the chance, but this threat made no sense. "Anything new from your recruits?"

"Nothing," Diesel answered. "They give me daily reports and will contact me straight away if there's anything new or off."

Frustration made my breathing ragged. I needed something, just one trail to lead me to figure out the connection and Nox's game plan. I'd then make sure whatever shitshow Nox was playing would stop for good.

Cole cleared his throat, drawing all eyes to him. "What are you going to tell Lena? You know this may push her over, right?"

I clenched my jaw, not needing to be told the impact this could have on my woman. "I'm not hiding this from her."

"Mace, I don't—" Diesel interjected.

"No, Diesel. Trust me to take care of her. She's mine, my responsibility." My eyes stayed fixed on his as I watched his internal battle play out in the tightness of his eyes and the crease of his brow.

Reluctantly, he nodded. "I'm here, though, yeah? I've been the one looking after her all these years. I can't back off completely, not yet."

I bobbed my head, indicating I'd heard him.

"Cole, get this cleaned up and burn it," Diesel ordered, throwing me a cursory glance to check I was in agreement.

I nodded once before focusing on Jase. "Get in touch with Jenson and see if he can figure out how someone bypassed the system, not only here but in my garage too."

Jase frowned. "They were at your house?"

"That picture of Abigail was in a box in my garage. There's additional security between the internal garage door and the house, so I don't think

they got in, but I want Jenson to send someone by to check. I'll head back there now with Lena."

Pulling out his phone, Jase pressed a few keys and lifted it to his ear, beginning to talk after a few seconds.

"I'll get Lena home and call if I need you, okay?" I addressed Diesel.

He lifted his head in acknowledgement. "That official yet?"

I paused, gauging his reaction. It was high time it was. We spent every night together, and making it permanent was something I wanted badly. "Yeah," I answered, "or, at least, it will be by the end of the day." I stood in front of him. "You good with that?"

Diesel assessed me a moment, not giving anything away. "Yeah, brother." He reached out and shook my hand, pulling me in and patting my back. "But this shit needs putting to bed. I'm in this the whole way."

"Thanks, brother." I patted his back once in return and stepped away, heading back outside to Lena, grabbing her helmet on the way out.

She was out of the car immediately and in my arms in a few steps. "Everything okay?" she mumbled against my chest.

"We'll talk when we get home." I squeezed her slightly before releasing her from my hold. She looked up at me as I positioned the helmet on her head and fastened it. I found it in me to offer her a small smile. After all, she looked fucking adorable wearing the helmet.

Positioning and securing my own helmet, I then mounted my bike, started the engine, and indicated for her to climb on. With her familiar warmth pressed against my back, her arms around my waist, a tense breath left me. Lena on my bike was something I looked forward to. It offered us both the chance to escape, even for a short while. A part of me just wished we could keep on riding and leave all the mess behind. Instead, all too soon, we were pulling up outside the house and then heading inside.

I went straight into the kitchen and grabbed us both a beer from the fridge. Sitting at the table, I placed the drinks down, and Lena joined me, turning in her chair so her knees brushed my thighs.

"You know, your silence is freaking me out a little." She huffed out a small, nervous laugh. "What was inside the office?"

I angled towards her and cupped her cheek, grazing my thumb across her bottom lip. "You're so fucking beautiful, baby, especially when you're brave and direct."

She scrunched her nose at my words. "That bad, huh? Are you worried I'll have a panic attack?"

"No," I answered honestly. "I think you'll handle what I have to say. It doesn't mean I want to put this shit on your lap or in your head, though."

"Is that why you're stalling?" She angled her head, her eyes flickering over my face, no doubt trying to get a read on me.

"You think I'm stalling?" I was totally stalling. While I was going to be honest with her, it didn't mean the conversation was going to be easy, especially when she realised the graphic nature of the pictures. The thought led me to clench my jaw hard, knowing some fucking scumball had been watching the two of us. Nothing about the situation sat well, but the irony of someone getting so close to me of all people was not lost on me. Unsurprisingly, if anyone were going to lose their shit, it would be me. My level of fucked-off had skyrocketed and preparing myself to tell Lena wasn't helping.

Lena's brows lifted high in challenge. She was reading me far too well.

"There were photos of the two of us together having sex, from different times. Prints were spread all over my desk. There was also a photo of Abigail there too." My voice was controlled, my tone matter-of-fact. "I think it was Nox, and it was definitely a warning. I just have no fucking clue what that is yet." She remained still, her face impassive. "But I promise you I'll get this shit figured, and more than anything, you're safe, baby. I promise."

Starting to worry that she had yet to respond in any way, I stroked my thumb over her knee and squeezed. She looked down at the action before returning her gaze to me, before it shifted to her untouched beer. Picking it up, she brought it to her lips and tipped her head, taking a long pull. The pull kept going until the damn thing was empty. Swallowing, she moved the bottle from her lips, placed it on the table, her eyes on me the whole time.

I had no fucking clue what was going on. I was as freaked out as I was turned on that she'd just downed a bottle of beer in one gulp.

"Lena?"

She lifted her hand in a stop signal.

So I waited.

And waited some more until finally, she huffed out a breath, and closed her eyes.

I was about to speak, but her eyes springing open had me closing my mouth. Her voice was eerily level when she spoke. "So a jerkoff has been taking photos of us doing the dirty and just, what, left them there for you to see? To let you know someone was invading our personal space? Have I got that right?"

I bobbed my head, deciding keeping my mouth shut may be for the best, for the time being.

"How old were the images?"

"Some could have been a few weeks, but there were ones of us from today, in the office." I watched her gulp and then bite the inside of her cheek.

"And what about the picture of Abigail? Were you...?"

"No." I shook my head. "It was just a picture I'd taken of her. It was stored away in the garage."

"Here?"

"Yes. I have guys investigating and coming around to figure out how they got in undetected. They'll put some extra measures in place too."

"So what are you planning on doing with the photos?"

"Cole's bagging and burning them."

Her face blanched, the first physical reaction she'd given. "They all saw the pictures, Diesel included." It wasn't a question.

"I know it's a big deal, baby, but don't even spend a second worrying about that. All those pictures achieved was pissing off a group of hard-arses. You have nothing to be embarrassed about."

"How graphic were they?"

I sighed. "They weren't close-up porno shots or anything, Lena." I attempted a quick smile, sure it came out as a grimace. She snorted, much to my relief. "Seriously, the images are already long gone. The focus now needs to be working out what game's being played and putting a stop to it."

"A game?" Her voice rose, her calm evaporating with those two words. "You think this is a fucking game?"

While anger wasn't ideal, I preferred it as her way of coping. It meant that she was at least in part controlling her emotions and reaction. "Bad word choice. I'm sorry." I took her hand in mine. "Just give me time to figure this out, okay?"

Her shoulders sagged; her anger short lived.

"Okay. So what now?"

I knew that there were such things as perfect timing, and this was no doubt not one of those times, but I couldn't stop the next words from spilling forth. "I want you to move in with me for good, today." I paused a beat. "I want us to live together."

"Why?"

Okay, not the reaction I was expecting exactly. "Why not?" I answered lamely.

She smirked and shook her head. "I mean why now?"

I returned her smile, relief settling in my tight chest. "You were always going to live with me, baby. You're mine. Today seems as good a day as any."

Quirking a brow, she rested back in her seat, grabbing my beer from the table. "Oh, really? I'm a sure thing, am I?" She took a drink. "What if I don't want to move in?"

I squinted at her, choosing not to bite and only interpreting her words one way. "We can get a new place together if you want. I'm okay with that. Whatever you want." I shrugged. "And you know, I'm the sure thing in this relationship, Lena. You can count on that." I leaned back in my own chair and watched her reaction.

She worried her bottom lip, seeming to mull over my words. "Have you got empty boxes in the garage?"

Grinning, I stood and dragged her off the chair, swiping the bottle from her hand before she dropped it. Lifting her, I turned and placed her arse on the table before stepping between her legs. "Thank you," I whispered against her lips, brushing against them gently and caressing her bottom lip with my tongue. "Let's do it now so I can then focus on working through this clusterfuck, okay?"

She nodded and then pressed her lips against mine. While I wanted to seal the deal by spreading her out on the table and feasting on her pussy, I wanted to get her moved in so I could start investigating properly. Allowing Lena the small reprieve of moving in was what she needed; hell, it surprisingly calmed me too, enough so the red rage had long faded. It would mean I could think and investigate with a clear head, and be driven by facts and evidence rather than gunning for blood with my emotions ruling me.

Chapter Sixteen

LENA

My hand met cotton rather than Mace. Opening my lids, I peered into the darkness then picked up my phone to look at the time. 3:27 a.m. After rubbing my eyes, I sat up, switched on the bedside light and got out of bed. His side of the bed remained unslept in, meaning he'd yet to come to bed. It was four days after the incident at the office and four mornings that I'd woken at an ungodly hour alone.

I understood his drive and the seriousness of the situation, but he was going to burn himself out unless he allowed himself to rest.

I threw on my PJs, a cute shorts set with a heart print, and made my way out of the room. I paused when I heard voices. Not distinguishing between them, I carried on through to the kitchen and found Mace, Jenson, and Diesel at the table. They were surrounded by paperwork, their laptops open, and were talking animatedly.

Mace looked tired and ruffled, but there was also something different about him, something I'd missed over the last few days. His eyes were alight with excitement, his knee bouncing as he spoke. Diesel and Jenson looked crazy eager about something too, especially considering it was drawing up on four o'clock.

"Drink?" I asked from the end of the room. Three pairs of eyes darted to me. All three handsome faces smiled, until two dropped into frowns as their eyes raked over me. Diesel seemed unimpressed, while Mace shot out of his seat and took long strides towards me.

"Where are your clothes, baby?"

I snorted. "It's after three. I was naked. You're lucky I threw these on." I was deadly serious, and he knew it. It wouldn't be the first time I'd made my way around the house butt naked.

His eyes darkened. "You look too sexy. Want to throw something else on for me?"

"Don't mind me," Jenson called out. I looked over Mace's broad shoulder just in time to see my brother smack him around the head. "Hell, man!"

"That's my sister, dickwad."

Jenson shrugged. He knew exactly who I was to these two big men and apparently took pleasure in winding them both up. I grinned and looked back up at Mace. I was half tempted to push past him and go and put the kettle on—sometimes it was fun poking the bear—but I was more eager to find out what discovery they'd made that had put eagerness on their faces when I'd first entered.

Standing on my tiptoes, I pecked a kiss on Mace's lips. "Fine. Put the kettle on for me, please." I spun around and then squealed when his hand made contact with my butt. I threw him a scowl over my shoulder before turning and grinning, loving the laugh I left behind.

After throwing on some longer shorts and a singlet, I headed back and started making drinks, half listening to the guys talking. I looked on while the teabags were steeping.

Mace, while sleep deprived, was still incredibly hot, especially when wound up with excited anticipation. I flicked my gaze to my brother. He actually looked fairly together, as though he'd at least managed to get some sleep. His dark hair was in need of a trim, and it looked like his rough facial hair was becoming a beard. With me no longer living with him, he hadn't me on his case, which worried me.

Despite being a grown-arse man, he didn't take care of himself as he should. I just hoped that since I wasn't under his feet, he'd feel able to have a life outside of work and running the club. He needed to find time to have fun along the way too.

Then there was Jenson. I had to admit, he was pretty sexy, but in a different way to the hotness of Mace. Yeah, he was built, but not one piece of ink decorated his skin, making him stand out that much more as he sat with my brother and Mace. His hair was closely shaven and dark, and he had gorgeous olive skin. I didn't know Jenson all that well, but I knew enough of him to know he excelled at what he did, so much so that he and Mace were talking expansion and partnership.

I was excited for Mace. He worked his arse off and did so much good. Yeah, he was paid at the end of the day, but he also did pro bono work on occasion. The world of security was nothing as I had imagined and while I'd only recently stepped into the environment and there was still a lot to learn, I was eager to help with the expansion and to put my degree to good use.

Finishing the drinks, I took them to the table, handed them out, and sat. The guys thanked me and then I waited, not so patiently, to find out what

the excitement was for.

Mace grinned at me, reading me like a book, knowing the tapping of my finger was my failed attempt at being patient.

"Chris checked in," Mace started, referring to one of Deadwood's new recruits. "O'Leary's clean as a whistle. There's been nothing at all suspicious. I've dug in a few files too, but I can't find any link."

I glanced at the men, my brows dipped, wondering how this information could be a good thing. "I don't get it," I admitted.

"Well, Chris made a call for Flick to join him, said there was something dodgy about Enfield." My eyes widened in surprise. "Flick ended up trailing him over the last three days and spotted him meeting with Rebel."

"Shit. What sort of meeting?"

A vein in Mace's temple twitched as soon as he'd started talking about Enfield and his possible involvement. "Envelopes changing hands and a couple of arguments too. He definitely wasn't there as a cop, and Rebel wasn't wearing his cut."

"It was a good thing it was Flick there. He's a freaking genius or some shit with faces," Diesel cut in. "Not that Rebel's ugly fucking face is easy to forget." He snorted in humour.

My head spun with this new information, and I gasped as pieces fell into place. While there was still not a whole picture yet formed, Enfield was a pretty major player. "Mace"—I took his hand—"I'm so sorry. Enfield?" The main thing I knew about Enfield was that as Mace's ex-boss, he was a guy Mace trusted. That must have stung.

With his nostrils flaring and his jaw tight, it was clear Mace was struggling to get control of his reaction. Tears filled my eyes knowing that a man Mace trusted was responsible for Abigail's death. He may as well have pulled the trigger himself.

Needing to be closer to comfort Mace, whether he realised he needed it or not, I quickly moved and sat on his lap, throwing my arms around his shoulders and burying my face against his neck. His arms were quick to wrap around me as he pressed his head against my shoulder. "I'm so sorry, baby," I whispered. There was nothing more I could say or do, no words to make the hurt disappear or for the pain to fade.

Lifting my head, I looked into his eyes when he shifted. I placed my lips against his, hoping to let him know not only did I love him, but I was

there in whatever capacity he needed me. He'd helped me so much in my own recovery, to the point I was finally functioning in society again; for that, I could only repay him with the care and understanding he'd shown me.

Jenson cleared his throat. "Do you guys need a minute?"

Not taking my eyes off Mace's, a small smile curved my lips. "No, we're good."

Mace then lifted his hand to my face and wiped a stray tear from my cheek that I hadn't realised had fallen. "Thank you, baby."

I swallowed the lump in my throat, needing to be strong for this amazing man of mine. Finally able to breathe and not feel as though I was near an emotional breakdown, I quickly kissed his forehead and jumped off his lap, returning to my seat. Despite my attempt at casual and pretending that Diesel and Jenson hadn't just witnessed my softness, I cleared my throat and said, "So what's your plan?"

My eyes landed on my brother's, and he offered me a wink. I knew this was hard for him too, especially due to his fierce need to protect me. I was also amazed that he didn't cause a stink about me being privy to the discussions. Though I was convinced that was more to do with Mace's insistence. A gentle heat wrapped around my heart at the thought.

Mace was the one who answered me. "I've called O'Leary"—I raised my brows at this news—"who's already started working on the paper trail. The more I thought about O'Leary since meeting with Nox, the more I realised there was no way he sold us out. He called about an hour ago. It seems Enfield used his wife's name, or rather her maiden name, to purchase a warehouse about forty kilometres out of town. That same building had plans submitted and approved about twelve months ago by McKenny."

I was sure my mouth dropped open in response to the connection.

Mace shook his head. "I didn't fucking see it. I've been looking into every single job McKenny had for the last couple of years at least, and I didn't fucking see it."

I understood his frustration and what nailing McKenny meant to him. "So drugs, this is all about drugs?" When Mace's dad had been released from prison last year, and after it had all gone wrong, it seemed his dad had had some dodgy dealings with McKenny and meth. Nothing would stick on McKenny though, and from what I'd learned, he'd already seemed a step ahead. "Is the warehouse a meth lab or something?"

"We're suspecting so, yes. O'Leary's chasing a warrant, but because it's Enfield, he has to go through Internal Affairs, so it may take a few days."

I looked at Diesel, noticing he'd been surprisingly quiet through everything. While he wasn't anti-cops, hell, he'd become friends with Mace while he was on the force, he'd had so many run-ins with them in the past, his trust didn't stretch very far. I know he liked to handle things in-house, but it sounded like the level of shit was far beyond that of an MC's reach. I was relieved at the thought and just hoped that the Riots were buried deep enough to be slammed too. It would make life a whole lot easier for Deadwood if that were the case.

"So what do you do between then and now?" Things had been quiet since the break-in, and I remained clueless still as to what all the photos had to do with any of this.

Diesel finally spoke, "We keep digging, but we keep low. We're going to reach out and see if we can find out a bit more about Riots and to see if they're buying direct from McKenny for distribution."

"Isn't that what the police will do?" I asked.

Quirking a brow at me, Diesel held back his scoff, barely. I knew the look well enough. "I'm sure they will, but they targeted you and Mace, so there's no way I'm walking away from this."

There was no use in arguing with Diesel, so instead, I nodded my understanding.

I'd be just so bloody relieved when all of this bullshit was over so I could finally start living the freedom I'd barely had a taste of. With still so much unknown, there was no chance that would be happening.

I stayed up for another hour before Mace nudged my half-sleeping form and led me to bed. "Come on, the guys have gone, let's get some sleep."

I yawned, allowing him to shuffle me to our room. Even in my almost comatose state, a thrill shot through me at that thought. *Ours*. It was a pretty heady feeling, knowing we'd taken our relationship to the next level. While life had its multitude of stresses, especially at that moment, I didn't want to be anywhere other than beside Mace.

We snuggled down, his strong arms wrapped around me. "You okay?" I murmured.

After pressing a kiss to the back of my head, he answered, "I will be."

I yawned, and scooted closer to him, much preferring being in his arms when I slept. "It'll all be over soon, right?"

"I'll make sure it is. I promise."

With my eyes firmly shut, I smiled and released a contented breath. It finally felt as though we were moving forward. It was a great place to be.

#####

The next two days were tense and busy. The club get-together had been postponed, which I hated as it was time I couldn't spend with Janie and my attempt at normalcy, plus Mace had cancelled lunch at Jo and Liam's, which also sucked, but I understood his desire not to spread the anxiety into their lives. We spent time at home, the club, and the office, but only at the latter when Mace needed to access paper files there. He also used it as the meeting spot for O'Leary. While I wasn't involved in any of those meetings, Mace told me what he could.

Through an amazing amount of research and brains coming together, it seemed the dots were finally joining. Mace had given me the simple bare bones, which was probably a little more than he should have done, but having knowledge also helped to keep my anxiety levels down.

It seemed the big question was how Enfield got involved in the first place. There must have been a connection for years if he really was responsible for sharing with Riots the intel of the raid that killed Abigail. For him to remain under the radar, it meant he was as smart as he was lucky. I just hoped that finally his luck had run out, and that Mace could outsmart him.

The McKenny-and-Riots connection, it seemed, was less of a surprise. They'd found the link between McKenny and Enfield, and the one between Enfield and Riots. It had since become a mission to pull all three together. Internal affairs wanted the whole association to be solid, so there would be no chance of Riots and the two individuals not going down. There could be no uncertainty in the takedown.

We'd been at the office for a couple of hours, and unbelievably, I was getting cabin fever. "Cole," I called out, "can we get some fresh air?" He glanced quickly at Mace, who nodded and offered me a small smile. He was in his office talking with O'Leary and someone from IA.

"Sure thing, Lena. Do you want to walk to the café and grab a coffee?"

I nodded. There was a small café on the same road as the office. It was only a ten-minute walk, and a journey and a shop I'd visited a few times. I

grabbed my credit card and phone and threw Mace a quick wave. He offered me a wink before turning his attention back to the conversation and the mountain of paperwork surrounding them. From what Mace had told me, they were getting closer and were chasing a lead on McKenny. He was the one they were struggling to pin something on. Being an architect on a building that just happened to make meth wasn't enough of a link, which I understood. They needed something concrete.

We stepped into the sunshine and I inhaled deeply, feeling lighter already. While it was wonderful for Mace to be involved in the investigation—O'Leary had pulled a heap of strings to make that happen—as I was sure he would have struggled to let go, it still filled me with unease that he was too close. Yet I knew he needed to beat this thing to truly find peace. He'd never admit as much to me, especially as I knew he loved me and was happy, but the death of someone you loved, particularly under such brutal circumstances... I didn't know if that was something you ever got over.

Instead, I could only hope for acceptance.

"You're quiet." Cole nudged me with his elbow, drawing my attention to him.

Flicking my gaze to him, I smiled and shrugged. "Just overthinking, you know."

He placed his strong arm around my shoulders and tugged me to his side. "Crazy shit going on, right?"

A laugh burst free as I spoke. "You could say that." I put my arm around his waist, appreciating the comfort. We'd known each other a long time, and Cole was definitely a calming, reassuring presence. A bit of a surprise, since he tended to cause a little mayhem wherever he went.

Finally reaching the café, we stepped inside and went about ordering drinks for everyone. The place was relatively small, yet familiar, so I was able to relax and wait while making small talk. "I'm just going to pee before we head back." Cole nodded. The restroom was a single unisex toilet, with no additional exits, and the first door to the small divide was visible from the café floor.

After peeing, I washed my hands and looked at my reflection. Tiredness etched my face, but it was nothing like Mace's. We'd eventually catch up with sleep when the stress was over. Once my hands were dry, I

headed back to the main room and to the counter. I paused and looked around for Cole, confused as to why he wasn't waiting for the coffees.

Maybe they'd already arrived, and he was waiting outside with them? I walked to the counter first and asked, "Are our drinks already done?"

"Almost," the young woman answered with a smile.

"Thanks." I couldn't quite manage a smile. Assuming Cole was waiting just outside, perhaps on his phone or something, I headed out. I looked up and down the street. Not seeing him, my heart pounded loudly in my chest, gradually picking up speed. There was no way he'd have left me.

I leaned against the wall, just to the side of the café, willing myself to gain control. I also tugged out my phone and punched in my PIN. I was about to hit Call, when a voice stopped me.

"Lena?" I looked up, my eyes landing on an unfamiliar man. He was smartly dressed and smiled down at me. Nothing about this guy screamed danger, but the way his smile didn't reach his eyes had my finger hitting the Send button. I clutched my hand around the phone, holding it low at my side.

"Do I know you?" My voice was steady, not showing the leap in my anxiety.

He stood directly before me now, a healthy distance away so as not to make me even more uncomfortable. "No. I don't believe we've had the pleasure. But with a face as beautiful as yours, I'd recognise you anywhere."

I frowned, not holding back my confusion.

Taking a minuscule step forward, he leaned in a little closer. "I would imagine if you parted your lips, it would reflect you midorgasm perfectly."

I flinched, my eyes widening. *What the fuck?*

He gave an indecent groan, causing goosebumps to spread over my skin and nausea to rise in my gut. "That's almost the exact look when he's fucking you. It's enough to get a man hard just at the thought, but seeing it in person, Lena, I have to admit, my cock is throbbing for a taste."

Vomit rose, but I clenched my jaw and breathed deeply, not allowing myself to lose it. Though maybe throwing up all over this guy would be the perfect way to get him to back the fuck off. "Listen, pervert." There was no strength in my voice, which pissed me the hell off. I strengthened my resolve, forcing fierceness I didn't feel into my words. "I don't know who the fuck you are, or what you think you know, but I need you to get out of my face."

His grin wasn't what I was hoping for. "I'll tell you what, lovely Lena, you tell that prick man of yours to back off and... Cole, is it?"—I blanched—"May just return to you in one piece." A car pulled up to the side of the pavement. The guy looked over his shoulder and took a step back. "That's my ride."

No! He had Cole? What the hell was I supposed to do in a situation like this? "Wait!" I called as he stepped towards the idling vehicle. "Where is he? Where's Cole?"

Opening the car door, he paused and stared hard at me. "I'd hate for him to miss out on spending time with those gang members he likes so much. You know, some say scum attracts scum."

I found my voice. "You'd know all about that, you fucking coward." The sounds of bike engines pulled my attention away and towards the street. I couldn't yet see him, but I knew Mace would be here any moment.

The man's face tightened before he entered the car and the vehicle sped away.

Immediately, I sank to the floor, my head almost touching my knees as my body shook. I remembered my phone and looked at it, hearing a faint noise.

"Lena, Lena?"

Lifting the phone to my ear, I sobbed, "Yeah?" It was a voice I didn't recognise.

"This is Detective Thompson. I'm working with Detective O'Leary and Mace. I saw you at the office earlier. I'm still here. Just hold tight, okay?"

I nodded into the phone.

"Lena, okay?"

"Okay," I managed to answer, just as Mace pulled up with Diesel, a car directly behind them.

"Is that them?"

"Yes."

"I'm hanging up now. You're safe."

"Okay." The phone connection ended.

Mace was before me, his helmet off as he scooped me into his arms. He shushed me as I cried into his shoulder. "C-Cole...", I sobbed.

"Shh, we know, baby. We're on it. We'll get him back, okay?"

I cried harder, my whole body trembling as he held me close. I wanted to escape, to hide, not seeing any way for this to end well. My whimpering

was uncontrollable, despite my attempt to gasp in breaths, and if I didn't stop soon, I would start hyperventilating.

"Lena, look at me, baby."

I raised my head, shudders wracking my body.

"I need you to breathe with me. Can you do that?" I focused on his voice, on his lips, watching as he took exaggerated breaths in and out.

"Okay. I'm okay." While my muscles were still taut, I offered a false smile. His dipped brows told me he didn't buy it. But through the tightness in my chest and my jumbled brain of devastation, I knew above all else Mace had to help find Cole. "How much did you hear?"

"Everything." I gave him a quizzical look that led him to pull out an earpiece. "I managed to grab it while Thompson stayed back to try to reach you and get a recording." He brushed stray hairs that were stuck on my tearstained cheek away. "You were so brave. You were," he asserted, responding to my disbelieving head shake.

"Who was he?"

"McKenny." He bared his teeth.

"But this is a good thing, right?"

The tiniest of curves lifted his mouth. "Yeah, baby, it is. Somehow he must have heard whispers that we were on to him, and for whatever reason, he fucked up big coming to you the way he did. And taking Cole—"

"He made it sound like Cole was with Riots."

"Yeah, we figured, which is fucking perfect. It gives a concrete tie between Riots and McKenny. The only thing I can imagine going on is that everyone involved is trying to pull rank, or potentially distance themselves enough from each other. I'm sure McKenny's trying to set up Riots and pull away completely."

Despite his guessing, he sounded so certain. There was no hesitancy in his tone, and I had no doubt they'd get to Cole. I was just relieved that Thompson and O'Leary were around when it all happened.

Diesel.

I quickly looked over Mace's shoulder to find him. He was on the phone, his face one of fury, though his eyes bored into mine. "Put me down, please, Mace."

He sighed and held me tighter, burying his face into my neck. "I was so fucking scared, baby." My eyes teared and I held on to him, pouring my love into the hug, trying to let him know I really was okay.

"I love you," I whispered.

He placed a kiss against the sensitive skin on my neck, making me shudder. "I love you, too. Always, baby."

"I know." He raised his head and I looked him in the eyes. "But I really need to see Diesel."

Reluctantly, he nodded and lowered me to the ground. I gave him one last hug and headed to my brother. I threw my arms around him. He clung to me with one arm, still speaking into the phone, but I didn't miss his sigh of relief.

He pulled away briefly from the phone. "Let's get you back to the office, okay?" He scanned the area, and I realised we'd pulled a small crowd. I nodded and allowed him to lead me to O'Leary's car before Mace stepped to my side and took my hand.

"We'll meet you there." His voice was gruff. Diesel nodded and placed another kiss on my head while continuing to listen to whoever it was on the end of the line. "Come on. I need you wrapped behind me." Tension thrummed through him. He needed the contact, needed to know I was really safe.

After a few minutes, we were outside the office and ready to get Cole back.

Chapter Seventeen

MACE

With my pulse still speeding, I held Lena's hand and pulled her into the storage room situated behind her desk, calling out, "Give me five," to the men who filed into the office behind us.

Once inside, I flicked the light on and stared at a bemused Lena. Concern furrowed her brow briefly before her eyes widened when I backed her against the wall. She flushed and her mouth parted.

Without a word, I cupped her jaw and cheek and lowered my face to hers, my mouth pressing against her soft lips. I groaned and kissed harder, pushing my erection against her stomach. Her whimper did nothing for my control; instead, it fuelled my need to have her, to taste her, and to make sure she really was okay.

Lena's mouth met mine with equal intensity, our lips sliding across one another's. She beckoned my tongue into her mouth with a flick of her own and stroked it. I groaned, my hand going immediately to the hem of her dress. Thank God, she wore a light dress rather than the tight jeans that looked so good moulding her arse.

I tugged her panties aside and caressed her pussy, alternating between dipping two fingers deep inside her and circling her clit. Her moan was heady, needy. She dragged her mouth away and tugged at my belt, unbuckling, unfastening, and then unzipping. My heavy cock sprung free, no longer restricted by the denim. She lifted her leg up, so her knee was against my hip, and bucked, seeking out my cock, as desperate for the connection as I was.

I braced my legs so I could hold her weight and grabbed her arse, lifting her up. Lena's hand on my cock had me pushing against her as she lined me up with her waiting pussy.

I slid home.

#####

Lena hid behind her desk, pretending to be busy filing. Diesel had been waiting outside when we entered the main space, making Lena's cheeks redden even more when he'd walked back in, ignoring us both and

heading into my office. I didn't blame him. If I'd heard Liam and Jo going at it, I'd be running the hell out of there.

Our time in the storage room had been rash, especially considering Cole was missing, but the chaos running through my system had teamed with the desire to rush out and put a gun to McKenny's brain. He'd threatened Lena, terrified her. For every crude word he'd said, I wanted to exact damage twofold. Instead, I'd decided to bury myself in my woman. She grounded me and eased my soul and the wild thoughts spiralling through my brain so that I could finally think and put this nightmare to rest, once and for all.

"What have you got?" I asked when I entered my office.

All three men looked at me, but it was O'Leary who spoke. "We have eyes on Riots' compound and still on Enfield and his warehouse. We've yet to locate McKenny, but should have a confirmed location in a few more minutes. We're just tracking footage now."

Because of the urgency of the situation and Enfield's involvement, my office had become the hub of IA and police activity. I knew everything had to be carefully orchestrated so no one involved would disappear. It just worried me that McKenny had put himself out there, making known he was a player. While his voice had seemed calm, his actions were reckless, almost impulsive. I could only assume he was scared, and unfortunately, that meant he was a flight risk.

"We have three warrants currently being issued and are working with three separate teams to organise a takedown in four hours," Thompson continued. "With the images of Enfield with Riots, and the growing paper trail connecting him to them and McKenny, we should have all we need for it to push ahead. McKenny's actions earlier gave us everything we need for his arrest."

"Can you connect him to Riots?" I asked.

"We can now. It seems Nox is pissed." O'Leary grinned, taking a great deal of pleasure in sharing the news. I couldn't blame him. The bastard had tried to set him up, though to what effect I was unsure. Probably just to push us off the scent.

O'Leary continued, "The fact that he already gave you McKenny's name was one thing"—I'd shared with them the intel from my visit—"but it seems that dumping Cole on Riots' doorstep was a push too far."

"So that's where Cole is for sure?" I asked, my heart spiking in eagerness, wanting to get him safe so we could take all the fuckers down.

"Yeah. We have a phone tap. Heard Rebel, Riots' new president, cussing McKenny out. Told him to come and collect Cole unless he wanted a war."

I looked over at Diesel when he scoffed. "Let the bastards take each other out. These fucking gangs and cocksuckers need shutting down. If they're dick enough to do the job for us, then let them have at it."

I understood his point. OMCGs were vermin that needed wiping out. And from Diesel's perspective, especially considering the amount of bad press and unwanted police interference he got as an MC, there was no wonder he wanted them all gone. A cleaner coast, the place where we called home, was what we all wanted. I just knew that wasn't the way the law worked.

"So we know Nox was already pissed with McKenny. He must have known we'd be able to link him with Riots in some way," I pointed out, still hazy as to what Nox was playing at. It was the only reason Nox would give us a name, one that turned out to be real.

O'Leary actually laughed, a big barking laugh that pulled all of our attention to him. I even heard the scrape of Lena's chair and saw her peering over, looking as bemused as I felt. "It also seems there's dissension in the ranks at Riots." While he laughed, the humour didn't meet his eyes. I was sure he felt just as we all did. Sick to the stomach and screwed beyond belief.

"You're shitting me, right? This whole thing is fucked-up." I shook my head. "So this is about wanting the new pres out?" My anger spiked. The fucker Nox, who still had plenty more years left in prison, had orchestrated the whole thing. Yeah, we'd be able to take each of them down, Enfield included, but that didn't make every moment of the last five years hurt any less. Hatred surged in my gut for the man who'd killed Abigail, and I wasn't thinking about Nox. Even though Enfield hadn't been there to pull the trigger himself, he was just as guilty as Nox.

Thompson picked up with, "Apparently, Rebel hasn't been playing ball. He's been pulling extra protection away from Nox, leaving him vulnerable. Nox still seems to have some loyal to him in Riots, so they're helping to facilitate the whole McKenny and Rebel takedown. They want him and McKenny gone.

"Because Enfield has recently got in bed with McKenny, his fingers dipping into one too many pies for Nox's liking, it no longer seems Nox is worried about protecting McKenny either, hell, nor Enfield. Even from prison, he wants to play king." Thompson shook his head in disgust.

I closed my eyes and released a frustrated breath. "Who do you have on the teams going in?" I asked.

O'Leary stepped forward. "I'm heading out now and will be focusing on Enfield, while Davidson will take down Rebel and the Riots, who are still there. Already, those loyal to Nox have taken to the wind. Jacobs is taking point on McKenny."

I nodded, knowing all involved and that they were good cops. I'd already attempted to barge my way into being involved in the warrants and arrests, just like Diesel had, but O'Leary and Thompson didn't budge. No longer having a badge could be a bitch at times. But I also had Lena to protect. Considering the threat to her and with Cole taken, as frustrated as I was to admit it, I was best off with Lena. There was no way Lena would be at risk again.

"Right, keep your line open and we'll be in touch. You staying here?" O'Leary asked.

"Only for another hour. Then I'll take Lena home." I looked at Diesel. "What's your plan?"

"I'll hang out here until you head home and then I'll head to the compound, wait it out there. I know the brothers are waiting for news."

O'Leary and Thompson packed up and headed out, leaving Diesel and me to linger and hover over Lena.

It didn't take long before she snapped at us both. "Seriously, guys, you keep staring at me. What's going on?" She sounded tired, which was hardly surprising. Her body and brain would have still been working on the push of adrenalin since her confrontation. She was due for a fall.

I shifted my gaze to Diesel and grinned. He shifted guiltily, knowing he was pussyfooting around her as much as I was. His gaze met mine and he shrugged. "This is driving me mad. I hate waiting," he grumbled.

"I hear you. I can't even concentrate enough to pretend to do work." I'd attempted to write an email, but had deleted the damn thing five times so had given up. "Lena, come on, let's just head home."

Her eyes roamed my face, no doubt taking in how wound up I was. She nodded immediately and turned off the computer. "You coming with

us?" she asked Diesel.

"No. I need to get back," he answered, stepping towards her when she grabbed her helmet and walked into the main reception area. "Just keep me updated, yeah?" He took her in his arms, held her close and then placed a kiss on her cheek.

"Will do," I reassured him as I led Lena towards the front door. It took but a few moments to arm the newly updated alarm and lock up. How they got around the first one was still a bloody mystery. Nodding at Diesel, we then pulled away, heading for home.

#####

Lena had been asleep on the sofa for a couple of hours. She'd finally crashed after taking a shower. Twice I'd walked past her sleeping form, making sure she slept soundly and wasn't plagued by nightmares. In the past few weeks, her dreams about the shooting had become less, and I was usually able to wake her quickly before they ventured on for too long. I didn't want this to be a relapse for her. She was doing so well with her recovery. The thought of her anxiety returning as intensely as when she'd first come home from uni made me sick to the stomach. I didn't want her to have to go through that ever again.

My phone buzzed from the kitchen, so I quickly headed over to answer it. It was O'Leary. "You at home?" he asked.

"Yeah, why?" I looked at the time. There were still about thirty minutes before the coordinated strikes were due to happen.

"Enfield's heading to your house." My body tensed. "We're going to take him while he's with you. Shit, Mace, sorry, man. It not ideal, but he was acting off earlier. He knows something is going on. If we wait till after he's left yours, he's likely to try to run."

"Why's he heading here?"

"He mentioned to Darby something about Nox wanting another meet, but that's bullshit. He hasn't been in touch since." I heard his radio come to life in the background. "Hang on," he said to me, before he radioed out orders. "We're about ten minutes out."

"Fuck, O'Leary, Lena's here." There was no way even Diesel or any of the guys could get to ours to collect her, not before Enfield arrived.

He paused before releasing a sigh. "I know. We'll make it fast. Just make sure she's out of the way."

"Fuck," I spat into the phone. I didn't want this to go down here. Through clenched teeth, I said, "Fine, but no screwing this up, O'Leary."

"I hear you." The call ended.

"What did O'Leary want?" Lena's sleepy voice made me jump. I turned, and she grinned. "You okay? It's not like you to not hear me."

I scooped her in my arms and held her tightly. "I need you to get out of here."

She stepped out of my arms and frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Do you think you can drive by yourself and head to the club?" If I could get her out of here before Enfield came, she could be away from it all.

"Why?" Fear shadowed her wide eyes.

"Enfield's on his way over to apparently talk to me about Nox. It also means O'Leary and the team will arrest him here. I don't want you anywhere near him." I took hold of her hand, grabbed my keys, and headed towards her shoes and her bag.

"Okay," she agreed with a wobbly voice. I gave myself the moment to quickly turn and plant a kiss on her lips.

"Thanks, baby."

She swallowed, and took the keys off me with a shaky hand. Opening the door, I looked out when I heard a car pull up outside the house, blocking mine in.

Enfield.

I tamped down my emotions, resisting the urge to rip his head off when he stepped out and offered me a small wave.

I nodded and called, "Lena's just heading out. Diesel's expecting her."

I saw the small flinch at my words. His expression was quickly replaced with a smile as he stepped closer, not getting back in his car or moving it the hell out of the way. "We haven't officially met." He reached out his hand to Lena and I looked down at her.

She didn't smile, but she nodded at him. "Detective Enfield, right?" Her voice didn't waver, making my heart swell at her bravery.

"Please, call me Jack. It's so good to finally meet you. I've heard so much about you." His eyes remained fixed on Lena's as he spoke. I wrapped my arm around her back so she was able to drop his hand. His words were total bullshit. Not once had I discussed Lena with him. He knew this. "I just need five minutes with my old friend and then you can both head out."

What I wanted to do was tug free the gun from my back holster and hold it to his temple. My finger twitched at the thought. Lena pressing her hand against my back, however, dragged my attention to her. Her eyes met mine when I glanced down. "Sure," I finally answered, making eye contact with him. "Come on in." I headed to the kitchen, ensuring Lena was in front of me. I went straight to the sink and turned on the cold tap, pulling at a glass as the water ran cool.

Once the glass filled, I held it out to Lena. "Here you go, baby, for your headache. The paracetamol is in the cabinet in the bathroom."

Taking the glass, she offered me a quick smile and left the room. I watched her go, prepared to intervene if Enfield attempted to stop her.

He didn't.

"What's on your mind?" I leaned back casually against the sink, the table and a workbench separating us.

For the first time since he'd arrived, Enfield looked uneasy. A slight sheen of sweat glistened in the light from the setting sun, and he shifted nervously on his feet. After clearing his throat, he said, "Nox was wanting another meet. Said he had more to tell you."

"More?" I acted confused. "He told me shit all to begin with, other than the fact he knew Lena and I were dating. I'm not going back so he can continue to try to fuck with me." My voice rose a decibel when I continued, "I'd think him shooting my fiancée would be enough, don't you think, *Jack*?" I rarely used his first name, so the use of it made him flinch. "What more is there to know? He took his gun and pulled the fucking trigger, shooting her in the fucking head," I roared. My muscles quivered with building rage. Unless O'Leary arrived quickly, I had no idea if I'd be able to hang on and play dumb.

Enfield stared at the floor and offered nothing but silence.

Pounding erupted in my ears and my vision clouded. I didn't want to see remorse or regret. I wanted nothing from him other than his body on a cold slab. Adrenalin rushed through my body when I stepped forward, my muscles straining against my skin. With every step I took before my stomach hit the worktop, flashes of Abigail filtered through my mind. Her laugh. Her smile. Blood seeping out of the hole in her head.

Fuck.

I welcomed the pain in my jaw from clenching my teeth so damn hard, focused on that and on the surface separating us. Would Enfield behind bars

be enough? Would it even begin to serve as justice for his part in her death?

Nausea swirled in my gut. I'd believed in the system, the law, once, but Enfield was supposed to be it. I reached for my gun, removing it swiftly and taking steady aim at Enfield. His lowered eyes meant he remained unaware.

"Why did you come here?" My words were hard as I struggled to stop myself from pulling the trigger straight away.

He sighed before he raised his eyes to mine. He didn't even flinch, didn't falter with the gun trained on him. His voice was quiet, pathetic when he spoke. "You should shoot me."

Tears pricked my eyes. I wanted him dead.

"It started as a quick buck, but then I got in too deep, too quickly. I couldn't find a way out."

"There's always a fucking way out," I roared. "You're just a fucking coward who got Abigail killed." Spittle built in the corners of my mouth, my fury driving me forward. "You fucking killed her!"

He didn't nod, didn't move as he looked at me, his gaze unwavering. "It's over now."

I scoffed, my eyes watery and struggling to focus.

"I deserve to die."

My finger twitched. It would be so easy to pull the trigger, to end it all. "You really are a fucking coward." I shook my head, disgusted at the piece of shit before me. He wouldn't stand a chance in hell in prison and he knew it. "You should have done us all a favour and just shot yourself," I suggested.

Seeing movement, I looked up at Lena. She stood a few metres behind Enfield, the whites of her eyes showing. Fear rolled off her in waves. Tears spilled down her cheeks and she covered her mouth.

Swallowing, I looked back at Enfield. "I'm not doing the job for you." My gun remained raised and steady. "You can join your fucking friend, Nox."

He didn't have time to speak before the two doors to the house opened and the team filed in, O'Leary at the front. "I got this," he called over to me.

I lowered my gun, holstering it as I walked away to let them do their job, making my way to Lena. She needed me.

Chapter Eighteen

LENA

There was nobody to call, nothing to do but wait. Detective O'Leary was already on his way, so it was a matter of holding tight and not losing the plot. Mace's raised voice reached me as I waited in the hallway unseen. I bit my bottom lip, attempting to stop it from trembling, but it was no use. As Mace's raw words spilled forth about Abigail's death, my eyes brimmed and overflowed with tears. I clamped a hand over my mouth and caught my sob, my anguish for the man I loved rushing through me with such speed I was afraid my knees would buckle.

I heard the shift, the change in tone. Something had happened, but I had no idea what. It was that I needed to know, so I stepped away and into view of the kitchen.

Mace's eyes connected to mine in an instant. His pain was gut-wrenching, squeezing at my heart. If my hand hadn't been still against my mouth, I was sure I'd have called out to him. With my throat clogged with emotion, my tears took full control.

Terror then slammed into me. If he pulled the trigger, I didn't know if I'd ever get him back. I couldn't lose him, not after all we had been through, both apart and together.

"I'm not doing the job for you."

The words made me sob harder, ripping through me with the same force as the pounding in my heart. I didn't even jump when the doors opened simultaneously and the house filled with officers. At that moment, my gaze was locked on Mace as I tried to tell him from afar and without words all that he meant to me.

When he lowered the gun, he strode towards me, his mission clear, his stare intent. Before me he hesitated a second, the slight gesture filling my heart with sadness and love. I understood why he hesitated. He loved me, and I recognised his need to never harm me. I could never turn away from him or even fear him. Taking the decision out of his hands, I launched myself at Mace, wrapping my arms tightly around his shoulders and clinging on for dear life. His arms found mine and he held me in his strong embrace.

"It's over," I mumbled against his neck. There was no question. Finally, Mace could find a semblance of peace knowing Enfield would be held accountable. His arms drew tighter at my words, and more tears dripped down my cheeks, wetting his tee. His head buried against my neck, as overcome with emotions as I was.

Finally, with the various officers still walking around us, Mace lifted his head and then peered down at me as I raised my own. While he didn't smile, his eyes were lighter, calmer somehow. He still looked bloody knackered, and I was hoping we could sleep in each other's arms for at least a week. We needed to be still and to allow all that had happened to catch up with us so we could absorb its significance.

"I'm going to marry you someday," I said, my words calm and clear.

It earned me a smile and a kiss. "I know you are, baby." He then looked around us, for the first time taking in the activity, and then led me into the sitting room. Mace encouraged me to sit, and I did so willingly. The nap I'd taken earlier seemed a lifetime ago. The adrenalin rush of the last ten minutes or so was already dissipating and leaving me bone-tired.

We both looked at the hallway at the same time to see Enfield in cuffs and being escorted out. A few seconds later, O'Leary entered the room and sat on the chair in front of us. Darkness circled his eyes, similar to Mace and me. It seemed everyone was past due for rest and a quiet life.

"I've just touched base with Davidson and Jacobs. McKenny is in custody, along with Rebel and four more members of Riots. Rebel made a mistake of opening fire, but was taken down easily, and no one in the unit was injured."

"Cole?" I asked quickly.

Looking at me, O'Leary smiled and my tension unravelled a little. "He's good. They're taking him to the hospital to check him out." I jolted upright, about to spring from my seat before Mace held me down. "Nothing major. I promise, Lena," O'Leary assured. "He caused a fuss and all but refused to go. Jefferson had to talk him around."

Mace scoffed in amusement.

"What?" I asked, looking at Mace for an explanation.

"Detective Alice Jefferson." I raised my brows, indicating he should continue. "She's been known to sweet talk a guy or two, despite being a bad-arse."

"Oh." A burst of jealousy pulsed through me, wondering if Mace had ever been sweet-talked by her. I then rolled my eyes at myself at the ridiculousness, but hearts were fickle and apparently jealous things when they chose to be.

Mace lifted my chin with his thumb and forefinger, drawing my gaze to his. "Never with me, baby."

Heat filled my cheeks that I was so easily read and I cleared my throat, attempting to shake off the embarrassment. "Will he be released tonight?"

"He should be, yes."

I nodded. I'd happily allow my planned one week of sleep to be interrupted by visiting Cole the next day. While he was a brother by patch, next to my own real brother, Cole was the next-best thing.

"Listen, we're about done here. I've got a crazy forty-eight hours' worth of paperwork to write up with the shitstorm of tonight, so I best wrap up. I will need you to head to the station maybe tomorrow afternoon?"

I didn't like the sound of my week's sleep getting shorter so quickly, but still I nodded right along with Mace. O'Leary stood, Mace following.

"Today's a good day, Mace. We got the bastards." He pulled Mace towards him and hugged him. His voice was low when he said, "Abigail would have hated missing out on all this shit." Mace snorted, but I heard the emotion there, from both of them. Once more it seemed as though I had a never-ending supply of tears. I sniffed through them, rubbing at my eyes, trying to be brave and strong for Mace.

Mace patted him on his back before stepping out of O'Leary's embrace as he cleared his throat. "Anything you need, just call, yeah?"

O'Leary nodded and then looked down at me. "Take care." I launched myself at him, completely throwing him off balance and taking him by surprise.

"Thank you, for everything. He needed this so much. Thank you."

Once he'd steadied himself, he hugged me back. "You just take care of him." I pulled out of his arms. "He can be a bit of a moody prick at times, so any problems just call me and I'll stop by and sort him out." He threw me a wink and laughed, nodding once more at Mace, who gave an honest-to-God growl, and then backed away to finish up.

I looked at Mace, my tears finally stopping as I stared at him with wide eyes. "Did you just growl?"

Mace squinted a little as he took hold of my shoulder and dragged me towards him. "I'm not moody," he grumbled, earning a laugh.

"But you're a prick?" My heart swelled, loving that through it all, we found enough goodness in our lives to joke and laugh.

His hand slapped down on my arse and I yelped. Squeezing my arse cheek, he murmured, "I have a big prick," as he nibbled on my neck.

I snorted. "I'll be the judge of that."

"Always," he whispered, just before he placed a light kiss on my lips and enveloped me in his protective arms.

Epilogue

MACE

Against my better judgement, Jo had worn me down. That was how I'd found myself at a club barbeque with my crazy sister-in-law, gorgeous niece, and brother in tow, as well as Preston and Ella. It seemed Ella had wanted to get the lowdown on the MC too. Bloody women and their lady porn.

Lena sat in the yard area with Abi on the ground before her. Abi bounced up and down on her chubby legs, her hands on Lena's knees, squealing happily. Apparently, standing and bouncing was her new trick and she took such delight in doing it. That and holding hands while adults broke their backs bent over so she could walk around.

I groaned as I stretched out. I'd just had thirty minutes as her walking frame and it fucking killed. But I'd do it again in a heartbeat.

Lena laughed at something Ella said and shook her head before pointing at a couple of the guys. I groaned, realising who she'd pointed out. Max and Dingo were known for liking to share their women, so I could only imagine what Ella was asking.

I looked across at Liam, who was talking to Cole and Preston, none coming up for air as they spoke rapidly about who knew what. Finally, my eyes landed on Diesel. I grinned. I'd never met the woman who spoke animatedly before him, but had heard her mentioned a time or two. She was bouncing almost as much as Abi, and even looked pretty adorable doing so. She was a cute thing, and had this whole pixie vibe going on. She'd tagged along with Preston and Ella, no doubt at Jo's demand. She had a way of getting people to do what she wanted while making them think it was their idea all along.

I'd heard that Dani was actually a good friend of Preston, and had hit a bit of a rough patch. Looking at her now, the smile lighting her face and lifting her lips, you'd never think of it. I chuckled lightly and then looked to my right when Lena nudged me, Abi in her arms.

"What are you looking so pleased about?"

I nodded over at her brother and then back at her. Her brows lifted in surprise. "I'm not sure if he's ready to bolt or throw himself at her feet."

The grin spreading across Lena's lips made my mouth go dry. She was fucking beautiful. "Holy crap," she mumbled, "it's the latter. Seriously, he's hanging on every word." She placed a kiss on Abi's cheek and blew a raspberry there, making her squirm and giggle. "Just look at them," she continued, but my eyes were just for her. She then looked at me, realising I wasn't staring at her brother as per her instruction. Her brow wrinkled. "What?"

How could I even begin to answer such a simple, complicated question? "Next month I think we should start trying for a baby."

Her breath caught and she proceeded to cough, her face turning bright red. I laughed as I patted her back. "Breathe, baby."

She gulped for air and passed me Abi. I propped her on my hip and faced Lena head-on. "You can't just say sh-stuff"—she glanced at Abi when she corrected herself—"like that to me and expect me not to choke. Seriously, Mace. A little warning here."

My face was a mask of innocence. "What? I think a month is plenty of time. It gives you enough time to stop taking the pill and grab yourself a dress and a bikini and whatever other sh-stuff you need."

With her brows dipped and her forehead wrinkled, she looked at me like I'd sprouted a second head.

"I thought I was romantic, trying to make a baby on our honeymoon." I shrugged.

Her eyes glistened with tears and she bit her bottom lip, trying to keep herself from crying.

"There will only be you, always. I need you to say you'll be mine forever." My hand clasped her waist and I pulled her close, the three of us in a little circle. "Will you be my always, Lena?"

The most beautiful smile imaginable broke free, brightening my world in its entirety. She nodded, happiness spilling down her cheeks. "As long as you will be mine, a million times yes." Placing her hand on my face, she stood on her tiptoes and pressed her mouth to mine.

Rightness settled in my chest, and laughter bubbled forth when Abi's hand touched my other cheek, startling me. I looked at Lena, seeing Abi's other hand on her face, and then I gazed at Abi. She shrieked in excitement before leaning forward and placing a wet open-mouth kiss on my cheek, leaving drool as her mark.

I tickled her tummy and returned my gaze to Lena. "Always, baby."

The End

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And to you, the readers, thanks for sharing Mace and Lena's story with me. This is the final in the Perfect series. But do not despair. Diesel and familiar characters will be back in my new Deadwood MC spinoff series soon!

About the Author

Spending the last few years near the Queensland coast, Becca is rarely out of the sea or off the beach. Dragging her long board with her and her overworked Kindle Fire, Becca enjoys her three addictions: reading, surfing and ogling surfers, one of whom is her husband of ten years.

She can still be found regularly on the beach with her family. Becca tends to leave the surfing to her boys; she's far too busy immersed in her own writing or, of course, with her head still buried in a new read.

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Street Team: www.facebook.com/groups/BeccaLeeST/

Also by Becca Lee

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A Perfect Moment (#1)

A Perfect Love (#2)

A Perfect Chance (#3)

Trust Duo

Trust (#1)

The Gift

Blood Sense (#1)

Shorts

Pull of the Moon (Denton Wolves #0.5) *A Very Werey Christmas Anthology*

Kiss & Tell *Tempting Scrooge Anthology*

Coming Soon

Trusted (Trust Duo #2)

Blood Change (The Gift #2)

Changing Moon (novel)

Denton Wolves (#1)

Deadwood MC (#1)

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