

OUT FROM UNDER



THE LOVERS DUET



SELENE CHARDOU

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The Lovers Duet
Selene Chardou

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Dedication

To my editor, Juli Valenti, for making this novel kick ass; my friends and family for all their support and lastly, my readers and fans. I write because I love to entertain but without your support and love for my novels, I would be writing only for myself.

Playlist

“I Knew You Were Trouble.” –
Taylor Swift

“I Still Haven’t Found What I Am
Looking For” – U2

“Girl on Fire – Inferno Version” –
Alicia Keys feat. Nicki Minaj

“Paradise” – Coldplay

“Demons” – Imagine Dragons

“It’s No Good” – Depeche Mode

“Salt Skin” – Ellie Goulding

“Battlefield” – Jordin Sparks

“Brave” – Leona Lewis

“Desert Rose” – Sting

“The Kill” – Thirty Seconds to
Mars

“E.T.” – Katy Perry feat. Kanye
West

“Roc Me Out” – Rihanna

“Locked Out Of Heaven” – Bruno
Mars

“Breathe” – Faith Hill

“Possession” – Sarah McLachlan

“It’s Time” – Imagine Dragons

“Savin’ Me” – Nickelback

“Love Into The Light” – Ke\$ha

“Chasing Cars” – Snow Patrol

“Run” – Leona Lewis

“Wild Horses” – Alicia Keys feat.
Adam Levine

“Bleeding Out” – Imagine
Dragons

Part One

Before

Chapter One

IT ALL STARTED with a boy.

Well, technically, he was a man, but I'd only recently just graduated from high school the Spring before and was on winter break from the University of Nevada in Reno so I still thought and referred to him as a boy.

I hung out with my brother,

Trey, at the Demon's Bastards Motorcycle Club compound, an activity that would have gotten me grounded for a month if my parents ever found out but I wasn't too worried about that. My mom and dad were visiting my aunt and uncle in Connecticut and wouldn't be back until after New Year's, when Tristan and I would go out to dinner with them to celebrate my acceptance and departure to the prestigious Stanford University.

It would be weird starting my school year in the Winter quarter after attending UNR for the Autumn semester but despite my grades and

extra-curricular activities, I'd still been placed on the waiting list for the prestigious Ivy League university.

We lived in the small town of Pine Bluff, Nevada. Population ten thousand. No, everyone didn't know everyone else, but there was a grapevine and it always seemed like everyone always knew what everyone else was doing. We didn't know each other personally but we knew of one another and in a town that size, my parents were very well known.

So were my two brothers and I.

Tristan was the jock of the

family. He'd left on a full ride to UNLV due to his excellent football record and a 3.7 GPA. He'd also been accepted at the University of Southern California but had no desire to leave my parents in Pine Bluff without one son who could make it home in less than a day's drive.

I was the brains. I played tennis at school and although I was good, I wouldn't be challenging the Williams' sisters or Maria Sharapova any time soon. I opted not to try out for a sports scholarship but used my sports activities and my volunteer work at the local convalescent home

to my advantage. My 4.3 GPA (due to the advanced college courses I took at Lake Tahoe Community College) easily should have guaranteed me a spot but despite everything, I'd been placed on the wait list and had to attend University of Nevada in Reno for the first semester.

My parents were extremely happy about my Ivy acceptance because my mother had gone to Boston University, and my father had graduated from MIT. They were both Boston natives, though my mother grew up in Beacon Hill while my father was raised in

Dorchester. All three of my brothers and I were born in Boston but the family had moved to Pine Bluff when I was only five—Tristan had been nine and Trey, my oldest brother, had been thirteen.

Trey was the reason I was able to visit the MC clubhouse without being picked on by every horny, attached and unattached biker in the club. I had extra protection with Clooney who I had been secretly seeing on the sly for eighteen months.

He was a prospect, only twenty-two years old and still baby faced with his soft Celtic looks, gray eyes

and light brown hair with blond streaks throughout. He was built yet lean due to two tours of duty in Iraq with the Army. He'd had his leg shattered when his units Humvee hit a land mine and although the VA hospital managed to repair most of the damage, it was the MC who gave him the money to see a specialist and actually get the steel rods placed in his right leg, followed by physical therapy.

Clooney still walked with a slight limp but at least he didn't have to use his walking stick and he'd almost healed to the point where he could run.

He was the man I'd given my virginity to and although we both knew there was zero chance of me ever becoming his old lady, we liked each other a lot. Too much because I was going to miss him with his girlish, creamy complexion covered in a handful of tats, and his lean body. I would even miss the scar that went from his left hip all the way down to his calf where the multiple operations had taken place. It was a thin, pink scar which had keloid and was slightly puffy against his otherwise perfect skin.

I lay on my stomach in his bed in the clubhouse and ran my hands

over one of the military tattoos on his smooth, hairless chest.

“So, what happens now? When will I see you?”

Ugh, I wanted to avoid that question like the plague and wondered why I felt like our situations were reversed. Why did I feel like the man and him the chick? I knew I would let him down whatever I told him but it was no use.

“You probably won’t see much of me,” I began in a cautious tone. “Stanford is no joke and I will have to work my ass off to maintain a good grade point average. I probably

won't be back until Spring Break or maybe summer vacation—I'm not exactly sure yet."

"Christ, that's a long time. Why are you leaving now?" he inquired, as he stroked my soft, dark hair.

Clooney loved my hair for some reason, though there was nothing special about it except maybe the natural chestnut highlights running throughout.

"I want to settle into dorm life and school starts on the sixth of January," I lied smoothly.

Due to my unique circumstances, Stanford had given me two extra

weeks to settle in and prepare. I would still be required to do the assignments due for my classes but I wasn't expecting to show up physically for my courses until the twentieth of January.

The reality was, I just wanted to get the hell out of Pine Bluff and be around intelligent people my own age. I loved my parents but they were suffocating and although we'd spent Christmas together, their departure was a relief to me and gave me room to breathe. I would be able to prepare for my new university and a couple days after they returned, I would leave and be

on my way to starting a new life in California.

Thank God for small favors.

He sat up in bed and stared at me before a smile graced his face. "I've got good news. I heard from your brother and the club's gonna patch me in."

"Oh, really? That's great news for you. It's what you have been working for all this time and now you'll be a full member of the club. Congrats." I hated the flatness in my tone but at the same time, it also gave me the out I desperately sought.

Now the opportunity presented itself before me, there was no way I wouldn't take advantage.

I bit my lower lip and looked down as he took my hand into his and our fingers intertwined. It was a beautiful sight, his creamy skin against my olive-toned skin. It provided me with the perfect excuse not to speak at all and for us to just enjoy a comfortable moment of silence.

My mother was one hundred percent Creole and my father was one hundred percent Irish. Both my brothers had my father's fair skin, though they'd inherited various

shades of our parents' dark hair. Tristan and I shared the same eye color, while Trey had our mother's hazel-green eyes. I had inherited my mother's olive skin and my eyes were my father's—a gorgeous sky blue that changed from cerulean to a paler blue depending upon my emotions. The only way anyone could ever tell my brothers and I were siblings, despite our different coloring, was that we had the same features as our parents, just arranged differently.

“Listen, I didn't just fall off the turnip truck and I don't expect you to...wait for me. That would be

unfair to both of us, especially because I really want to live the whole “college experience” and I know how it is here at the club when a party is going on. You are going to want to live it up, especially at your patch-in party. I think Trey had a hangover for about a week afterwards but that’s...club life...and it isn’t for me.”

Clooney stared ahead, before his gray eyes looked toward me again and then dropped to my breasts.

I looked good, I knew that. I would never be a skinny Minnie—it just wasn’t in my DNA—but I was healthy for my age at five feet, four

inches and one hundred and thirty-five pounds. I always worried I was too fat and struggled for years to get into that coveted size six, but it never happened. I didn't have an ounce of fat or cellulite on my body from years of tennis. I had nice toned arms that could rival the First Lady, a great set of natural thirty-two Cs for breasts, a slim waist and a womanly figure. It was my thighs that bugged me the most. They prevented me from wearing all the great outfits and teeny skirts because they were muscular and the reason why up top, I was a size six while all my jeans and skirts were a

size eight.

Of course, men never seemed to mind, and Clooney always went on and on about how I had a great body, shiny hair and a beautiful face. I loved him for that, but at the same time, I knew I couldn't lead him on. We couldn't happen because as much as I was tied to the club by my brother, I despised the whole fucking lifestyle. The violence, misogyny, and criminal activities were nothing I wanted any part of and I'd wanted to escape Pine Bluff since we'd moved here.

It was that simple, but how the hell did I convince him of that?

“I like you...a lot. You know that, Trista, so why are you making this more difficult than it has to be? Jax’s old lady, on *SOA*, is a doctor—why the hell can’t we work out?”

I laughed at this sentiment though it was obviously inappropriate. “*Sons of Anarchy* is a *television* show, Clooney. It isn’t meant to be *completely* realistic. How many club members do you know have old ladies who are doctors? Hell, how many old ladies do you know that went to college at all? It doesn’t happen, not in the *real* world.”

“So what do you expect me to do?”

Just forget about you?" He ran his hands through his silky, wheat-blond hair that was slightly greasy, before his hands cupped my face. "I don't want to forget about you, Trista. From the moment I laid eyes on you, I knew you were the one."

Melodrama had always been one of Clooney's weak points. He would be twenty-three in March and I'd just turned eighteen on the first of December. I was a classic overachiever who'd gotten involved with a guy who was sexy, belonged to a motorcycle club and barely graduated from high school with a 2.0 GPA.

What the hell was wrong with this picture?

Tristan would shoot Clooney if he knew, and Trey turned a blind eye. He didn't exactly *like* Clooney—though he was the one who'd sponsored him—and the fact that he'd been boning me for the past year didn't sit well with my brother at all. He was quite the player, my brother, but like most men in the MC, he suffered from double standards. What was good for the goose certainly wasn't good for the gander.

“We'll just play it by ear and see what happens after you're patched

in, okay?" I said gently, keeping my voice even.

I didn't want us to have some huge fall-out or fight because I hated drama more than anything else in the world. It was probably why I avoided the Danielle Steel and Janet Evanovich novels my mother read like the plague, and stuck to more intelligent authors like Stephen King, Anne Rice, and Annabel Joseph when I craved my sexy times. I liked to think I was the kind of person who wasn't completely selfish, but I couldn't be too sure. I knew I was passionate and when people pissed me off, there was hell

to pay.

Clooney smiled before he kissed me, and I wrapped my arms around his neck. It was the day before New Year's Eve and the club was already jumping. My brother was off on a job in Reno, though he was supposed to be back at the clubhouse that night. Trey "tolerated" Clooney and I together, but if he ever caught me in the prospect's bed, he would beat his ass black and blue and probably frog march me out of the clubhouse.

"I think we have time for one more round before my brother gets back from that run in Reno..." I trailed off when our kiss finally

ended.

“Then what the hell are we waiting for?” Clooney inquired, before he laid me down on the bed again and spread my legs with a determined hand.

If this was meant to be—whatever it was we had between us—then why was my heart knocking in my chest a million miles per minute and why did I always feel like such an awful human being? I knew and so did he: there wasn’t a viable future between us in the long term. So why was I such a coward and why couldn’t I tell it to him straight? Why did I have to wait

until I was far away from here before I would break the news to him with a phone call?

I closed my eyes, surrendered to passion and tried not to let my deceptively bad behavior get to me.

A new year was just around the corner and it was time for me to turn over a new leaf in life.

Chapter Two

LINX WAS TIRED of the shit and just plain exhausted.

After spending way too much time on the Gods of Rock Tour, he was ready to pack it in, though the only way he would get away with that was pulling one of Seth's stunts and that wasn't going to happen. Their former lead singer had

suffered from a drug overdose while they were in Copenhagen, Denmark.

Dumb fucking bastard, Linx thought with bitterness and anger.

Tired, horny and frustrated, he no longer blamed Talia—the former keyboardist turned new lead singer—for the situation at hand, but he would always resent her in his own way. He'd started Winter's Regret with Seth, Niko and Kris.

Lennon “Linx” Carter was twenty-six years old and already a rock star.

He played bass and wasn't just

good, but fucking excellent. He didn't believe in half measures and gave everything he was passionate about his all.

Of course it didn't hurt that he was good looking, with a healthy peaches and cream complexion from the brief sun exposure they experienced while they were staying in Dubai. This one feature was complimented by natural brown hair with blondish highlights, which he often dyed black, and penetrating cornflower-blue eyes that made all the women melt, though he mostly kept them hidden behind a blacker-than-black pair of Ray-Bans.

His soft Irish features included sculpted cheekbones, a long, straight roman nose, and slightly full lips that were as kissable as they were ready to flash a celebrity-made smile. He'd started wearing carefully trimmed facial hair that suited him for the tour and certainly didn't impede any female attention.

At exactly six feet, two inches and one hundred and eighty pounds, he was lean without verging into "junkie rock star" territory. His fashion sense completed his look and mostly included leather pants and a pair of shit kickers when he was on stage. While off stage, he was

a jeans and tee-shirt or wife-beater type of guy, with clean white Nikes and a leather coat, if he needed to stay warm.

Like most rockers, he was covered in tattoos: guns and roses on his chest, a heart on his stomach, shaped by the hands of his oldest nephew, and a full sleeve on his right arm. He had a half sleeve on his left arm, and knew he would eventually complete it once he was struck with the right inspiration.

Winter's Regret had started out like so many other rock bands heavily influenced by grunge and nineties alternative music. The

original members were Seth, Niko and himself, playing for kicks and free beer in local South Boston bars though they weren't old enough to drink at the time. Seth played lead guitar, as well as sang, and they were a great trio. The bars got bigger, they attracted the eye of a local manager and soon, they were actually making money doing what they'd always loved to do. What could be better?

However, once they realized they were all dead serious about music, they noticed that although Seth was an okay guitarist, he didn't exactly play at top form when he

was singing too. Their manager forced them to place an ad in the local newspaper and Kris Nieminen responded to it.

He was a full-time foreign student at MIT and although he had the look of a rocker with several strategically placed tats, they had all thought that the clean-cut looking Finnish guy would never fit in, after all, they'd grown up together and now they were bringing in an outsider.

Kris won them over at the first audition and they'd been together ever since. Hell, Winter's Regret had outlasted Linx's marriage to Cassidy.

A fellow Southie, she'd grown up on the border of South Boston and Dorchester and when he caught and captured her at the age of nineteen, he felt like the luckiest guy alive.

Time and money played tricks on him though, and now he wished he'd never known the bitch. The only good that had come from them playing house at such a young age were their two sons, Brady—named after that asshole quarterback of the New England Patriots, because Cassidy came from a football fanatic-loving family—and Jimi—named after the master guitar legend himself.

That was another great reason why he enjoyed being on the road and certainly a good thing about touring, he didn't have to look at her miserable face when she begged him for money.

Linx was no fool and Cassidy was still a beautiful woman of twenty-five. She played with her hair a lot, despite being a natural honey blonde. At the moment, she'd dyed it platinum with skanky black lowlights running throughout so she looked like some kind of rocker chick, though she had absolutely no talent and couldn't dress for shit. He knew she spent most of her money

on an extra nanny in addition to the one he paid for, daycare and clothes—she'd always been able to use men so the drugs, and most of her spending cash, she could hustle no problem.

It was his own sorry fault.

They'd both cheated during their marriage, the only difference was he happened to get caught which cost him not only custody of his kids, but both alimony and child support. The child support he didn't mind because he'd grown up in a two-parent household and he wanted to take care of his children. The alimony bugged the shit out him

because he gave Cassidy enough cash to get off her ass and find a job, but as long as the money was wired to her account, he knew she wouldn't get married and she would continue to be a pain in his ass.

Talia interrupted his concentration as he doodled on a notepad. He was thinking about the insane design he'd easily drawn being the next tattoo he decorated his body with. The tattoo sleeve on his right arm had been completely drawn and designed by him. He wanted to finish the sleeve he'd started on his left arm after they completed this tiresome fucking

tour.

“Great drawing. Is there anything you can’t do?” she asked, though her voice was husky and he knew she was just as tired as they all were.

“Yeah, I can’t play lead guitar,” Linx replied in a deep, masculine voice which served as the perfect back-up vocals for Talia’s strong voice.

“Well, we can’t have it all...we go on in about ten minutes. They are setting up the equipment right now.”

He turned toward her and stared directly into her bright, pale-green

eyes. His own were supposedly his best feature according to the ladies but he wouldn't know. Both his parents had some variance of blue eyes, as did his four siblings, so they were pretty boring to him despite the vast majority of the world being dark-eyed.

Linx had been named after another rock legend—John Lennon—and had grown up in a very average, though strict, Irish Catholic household. His father's family was from Omagh while his mother's was from Belfast. They still had cousins stuck in Northern Ireland and when they'd visited his grandparents all

throughout his childhood, it always seemed like another world, where violence and drinking was a normal occurrence. It was like being in a European version of Beirut to him. Peace always seemed so close, yet out of reach, thanks to the Loyalists, Irish Protestants loyal to the Crown, while the Unionists wanted a united Ireland, away from the control of the English.

“Where are we?” Linx wondered aloud, as he looked down at his drawing and decided it would be perfect on his forearm. Jimi and Brady’s names, along with their birthdays, were tattooed on the

right and left shoulder blades on his back.

“Dubai. We’re playing the New Year’s Eve concert, remember? It’s mega bucks, but I have already been warned that we might not be well received. You might have to take over on vocals half the time, because we aren’t in the most progressive part of the world. The United Arab Emirates isn’t Scandinavia,” Talia explained, before she cracked open a bottle of San Pellegrino water and drank from it.

“Wait, I thought you said we were in Dubai?”

Talia glared at him with that all-

knowing, *I finished university and you never bothered to go to one* look before she said, “Dubai is a *city* in the United Arab Emirates. It’s not its own fucking country. While we’re able to play here because they want to appear like every other wealthy city and the money is good, they have absolutely zero respect for women here. Yes, there are a lot of Westerners here, but a lot of the crowd will be rich locals and they won’t want to see a female lead singer.”

“Well, you know we’re here to back you all the way. It is a plus having three of the hottest and

sexiest men on the planet in your band.”

“Now *that* I won’t argue with.” She smiled in a sheepish manner before she put on her game face. “Come on, let’s go wow the fuck out of this crowd and check off another fucking concert before we can go home.”

That was the best news he’d heard all evening, and for the first time, he could admit that having Talia as their lead singer wasn’t all bad. At least she didn’t use drugs, rarely drank and only smoked occasionally. She was perfect actually, and so different from Seth.

Linx missed Seth like mad, but at the end of the day, the important issue to him was cohesion of the band and stability; Talia provided both and for that, he couldn't have been happier.

Yeah, there were parts of his life that sucked but the good definitely outweighed the bad and at the end of the day, it was all about the music.

Chapter Three

“HEY, SIS, WHAT are you doing here?”

It was a stupid question as far as I was concerned but I still smiled at Trey and tried to play it off as best as I could. Where else would I be for this festive occasion other than the clubhouse? My brother walked into the kitchen while I helped Brandy, the Vice President's old lady,

prepare a feast of different dips and various kinds of potato and tortilla chips in addition to fried chicken, potato salad and coleslaw for the boys.

“What are you doing in the kitchen?” I snapped back in a voice dripping with sarcasm. “This is a woman’s domain, right?”

“Not in the clubhouse, it isn’t.”

I turned toward Trey and silenced him with a look from my eyes. He was a sucker for blue eyes, even mine.

How could I describe my brother without it sounding inappropriate

and almost downright incestuous? He was a sexy, drop dead gorgeous man with ink on both arms, with the apt title of “Sergeant at Arms” displayed prominently on his right arm and a sleeve on his left.

He was quite young, at the tender age of twenty-six, to be given such a prestigious position. He’d been a club member since the age of eighteen—sponsored by Evan Hughes, Vice President and son of Jonesy Hughes, the President of the Club—and had proven himself a loyal member to a fault, and at the detriment of his real family.

Our mother still kept in touch

but our father had disowned him because he couldn't believe his son passed up the California Institute of Technology—Caltech—to be a hacker and live the thug life with the MC. He was also extremely intelligent, along with being young and good looking.

Dark brown hair combined with creamy skin that could tan, a five o'clock shadow, hazel-green eyes, a straight nose, that hadn't been broken, and pretty boy looks never left him short of female company. He was still young and had no intention of hooking up with an old lady, not yet at least, but I knew it

would be happening soon, and hoped to God it wouldn't be with Keri, his latest squeeze.

Keri was gorgeous enough, with her natural flaxen-blonde hair and ice-blue eyes, killer body and lightly tanned skin. She also happened to be a porn star that specialized in girl-on-girl action. It didn't seem to bother Trey, but I thought her occupation was disgusting. She was around tonight, wearing a pair of skinny white jeans splattered with silver paint, a matching silver halter top that barely covered her small boobs, and a pair of those clear hooker heels that were six-inches

high with an added platform. Her whole torso was out on display because her jeans were so low cut, and when she sat down, everyone got a glimpse of her black lace thong.

I poured myself a Southern Comfort and Coke, not that Trey minded in the least. He was too busy being half in the bag with his bottle of Jack Daniels, and joint etched firmly between his closed lips.

“So, when are you going to get rid of Miz Skank over there and get yourself a proper woman?” I wondered, before I sipped from my SoCo and Coke. “Doesn’t it bother

you the least bit that she eats pussy for a living?”

Trey dragged off the joint and handed it over to Brandy, who took it greedily in between two slender fingers decorated with black cherry painted talon-length nails. “When are you going to stop embarrassing me by fucking Clooney behind my back? I told you, Trista, I don’t want you messin’ with my brothers. It’s bad for the club and you’ll never be anyone’s old lady, especially a *prospect* like Clooney. He isn’t worthy enough to eat your pussy, let alone do anything for you.”

I stepped back from my brother,

my eyes wide by his use of such vulgar language toward me. “He thinks he’s in love with me,” I whispered to Trey. “I promise I am going to break it off with him when I get to Stanford.”

“You have to break it off with him, because there is no way is my sister is gonna be part of a fucking MC. You’re *better* than this, Trista —”

“So are you, Trey.” I interrupted in a cold voice. “You could have graduated from Caltech by now and be making mad money in Silicon Valley or Seattle, but instead, you *chose* this life. Dad fought his way

out of crime life, do you know how hurt he is to see his son fall right back in it?”

“Listen, I don’t want to talk about this—I just wanna get fucked up and party like it’s 2014—”

“It will be in less than six hours,” I murmured, before I brought out another tray full of snacks.

Cater-corner to the bar was a table set up with all the various food, along with paper plates and plastic silverware. We had picked up the good shit at Costco, but as soon as I delivered a tray, the food seemed to disappear as fast as the booze, which was not a good sign.

These parties were all the same.

Soon the open sex with the sweet butts would start, or as they were known in the Demon's Bastards MC, "Demon scrubbers", because that's exactly what they were. They were throwaway women with low self-esteem, who would allow themselves to be degraded in any way possible, just to have a place to stay. Some were in love with club members who already had old ladies; others just wanted to have bragging rights for having fucked a real, red-blooded, American biker.

Then, the vomiting would begin, and I'd be ready to call it a night. No

way was I cleaning anyone's vomit, whether it belonged to a member of the MC or a scrubber. I was doing my brother a favor by being here... although to be honest, I could have spent New Year's Eve with my best friend, Laura, and her fraternity boyfriend at their frat house at the University of Nevada in Reno. However, what good would that do when everyone knew I wouldn't be returning for the spring semester?

My thoughts were interrupted the moment a bunch of club members I knew burst through the doors along with Tristan and his girlfriend, Taryn. A pretty young

woman with alabaster skin that was lightly freckled, strawberry-blond hair and crystal blue eyes, she and my brother were a striking couple. Ironically, they'd met up again at UNLV, and had been going out for a few years. I had a feeling Tristan thought she was the one and, although it was always nice to see people in love, I wasn't exactly sure how well their situation would work out.

I liked her well enough, but it never seemed like a good idea to me that she was Dizzy's niece, nor that she had ties to the Lucifer's Saints, a rival MC to the Bastards. There was

a genuine dislike between the two MCs, although there was no hatred between them. The Bastards and the Saints were cordial, but they shared a bond of loathing and disgust for the White Knights MC, a neo-Nazi biker gang that controlled the meth trade from Northern California clear through southern Washington and Idaho.

While the Bastards made most of their money through offshore banking, along with an exclusive gun running deal with the Russians, the Saints made most—if not all—their money through illegal gun running, cocaine and heroin. They

had an exclusive deal with the Aztecas Inferno, a Mexican Motorcycle gang and the mob who still controlled many of the casinos in Nevada, though the state tried to cover up their involvement and claimed most were now owned by corporations.

The problem between the Bastards and the Saints mostly came from the protection the Bastards provided Raymond Jackson, a drug lord who controlled his own gang while he remained behind the scenes and inconspicuous. Northern Nevada only had a small black population, and it was best for all

that he presented himself as a legitimate businessman who owned a small chain of casinos in Reno and Lake Tahoe. Meanwhile, he had a lucrative drug trade run by the high class call girls who worked exclusively in his hotels and brothels.

Unfortunately, despite his respectability, his German-born wife, Ingrid, and two college educated children, the man was still on the Fed's radar and they watched him like a hawk. Gisela, his daughter, co-owned a law firm with the Bastards' Prez's daughter, Kyra Hughes, therefore he had in-family

protection since she was a criminal attorney. Drake, Raymond's son, was his personal accountant; he'd also committed a major faux pas when he knocked up Maeve "Misty" Cox, Desmond "Dizzy" Cox's daughter and the President of the Saints' MC.

Drake and his new bride had fled the country while Gisela tried to keep the peace by representing Cillian "Killer" Cox, the V.P. of the Saints, who was charged with murdering an ATF agent.

The motorcycle clubs, and the violence they brought with them, was the major reason why I wanted

to leave this place. I couldn't take the biker gangs and the casinos, the whores and the drug trade any longer. I was sick of it and how our whole lives were affected by it. My parents owned their own accounting firm, but it was mostly a front to do the books for the Lucifer's Saints MC and every illegitimate businessman come tax time.

Like most men, my father was a contradiction. He didn't want his children to be involved in a life of crime though he and my mother were neck deep in it. I suppose it made me feel slightly better they'd been bullied into their position as

accountants mainly for a biker gang but they also had to take some of the blame. We could have moved to another town, another state but perhaps they were just as greed-driven as the average adult and could only see working for the MC as an end game toward early retirement.

We lived comfortably but I couldn't disguise my quiet disgust at how our lifestyle came at the cost of lives lost, ruined and destroyed. They dealt with unsavory people and washing dirty money clean didn't make me feel any better, no matter how comfortable my life was

as a result of my parents' profession.

Of course, I was a walking cliché myself. I had secretly been the girlfriend of an MC prospect for over a year, Tristan dated a woman with direct ties to a rival MC and Trey was *in* the MC. I needed to get away because I didn't want this kind of life. I certainly didn't want to bring children into this kind of environment, no matter how charming Pine Bluff and its proximity to Lake Tahoe were. Underneath the town lurked a rot and filth that marred our beautiful surroundings and vaguely reminded me of the show, *Twin Peaks*. Like

that idyllic town, nothing was as it seemed and it was the same for the nearby towns of Birch Tree, where the Saints ruled, and Black Oak, the town where the Knights had placed their claim.

“Earth to Trista, how are you and what are you doing here?”

I turned towards Tristan’s voice before I smiled and walked over to embrace him and Taryn.

“I’m great, although to be honest, I can’t wait to get out of this po-dunk town,” I said, before I sipped from my drink.

Tristan glared at me with harsh

sky-blue eyes. “What’s that? Coke? You better not be drinkin’. Mom and Dad would have my ass if they found out their perfect daughter was caught at a Bastards’ party with this many drunk and fucked up people running around. What the hell is wrong with you? If anyone can understand how out of control these events can become, it’s you.”

“Well,” I said as I placed my hands on my hips. “If you have any ideas on how I am supposed to spend my New Year’s Eve, especially in our little hole in the wall town, I’m all ears,” I replied in a sarcastic voice.

“Maybe you should spend some time at home for a change. Take Clooney with you—he’ll make sure you get home safe and sound.”

I laughed out loud. “That can’t happen. Trey would go postal if he knew I was alone with Clooney. He told me I had to leave with you two when you decide to go home or he would have another prospect drop me off. He’s demanded I cut any and all ties to the MC before I leave for Stanford.”

“He’s right, you know,” Taryn replied in her soft, barely-there Northern Irish accent. “You’ve been surrounded by this whole sordid

scene since you were a wee child and it's not healthy. I was so happy to get the hell out of Belfast, I didn't know what to do. Of course, I miss me Ma but do you know what it's like to attend high school and university in a normal environment? No bombs exploding and not having to worry about being a Catholic?"

She paused and wrapped her arms around Tristan's waist. "That's why I love your brother so much. He loves me for me and it doesn't hurt that he's one of the most fit men I have ever met."

My brother looked at her before

he kissed her lips softly. “I love you too, babe.”

I smiled at both of them before I pursed my lips and left the clubhouse. I sat outside on a wooden bench and watched a few revelers in more than close-for-comfort positions while I drank my SoCo and Coke.

The sheer need to leave this place had become an all-consuming obsession and I couldn't wait for the New Year. As far as I was concerned, it couldn't come fast enough.

Chapter Four

LINX AWOKE NEXT to a bleache blonde and wondered where the hell she'd come from, before the remnants of the previous night began to consume his thoughts. He had a massive hangover and didn't feel like dealing with some random groupie.

This whole tour depressed the hell out of him but at least up until

about a month ago, he'd at least had Keren Hughes. She was a fiery redhead—daughter of the Bastards' Prez—who could fuck like a stallion and wasn't clingy in the least bit. It didn't even bother him that she still had her Scarlet Fever tattoo with Kasper "Kaz" Gillian's name written under it on her back.

They were old news though she was the lead singer of Scarlet Fever's first love and they'd dated for a while before he met his ex-wife Damira. Now that Damira was engaged to Kris in their band and Kaz had moved on to a young, blonde Norwegian shipping heiress

who worshipped the ground he walked on, Keren was the last of Kaz's concerns.

Everyone in Scarlet Fever was hooked up with a steady chick, so at least they had their significant others to help them through it but he didn't have a permanent woman and neither did Niko. Kris was engaged to Kaz's ex-wife and he seemed happy enough, while Talia "technically" was Seth's girlfriend.

Now that he was no longer around, it wasn't a secret that she was fucking Jaden Cox, the lead guitarist for Scarlet Fever—son of Dizzy Cox—though they'd been a

not-so-secret item since he sent his girlfriend—Faith Maguire-Cohen—packing. She turned out to be pregnant and was hooked on OxyContin and cocaine.

He thought about his own sons, then sat up and swung his feet over the side of the bed. The hotel they were staying in, the Burj Al Arab, was the most luxurious hotel in the city and featured in *Mission Impossible: Ghost Protocol*. Not that Linx felt special for staying there. Every hotel they stayed in was gorgeous and luxurious, but he still missed his own bed.

There was a knock at his door.

Standing, he slipped on a pair of black boxers and walked to the door. When he opened it, he faced Niko.

“Hey, bro, you look like shit.”

Linx grinned in an ingratiating manner. “Gee, thanks. Can you get rid of the skanky chick that is taking up room in my bed while I grab a quick shower? What time does our plane leave?”

“In approximately four hours but we have to check out in forty-five minutes.”

Linx scratched his rumbling stomach. “I’m fucking starving—why

didn't you wake me up sooner?"

Niko cleared his throat. "That's not why I came up here. Cassidy is blowing up my phone and cursing up a blue motherfuckin' streak because she can't reach you. Can you please call the crazy bitch?"

"Yeah...after I take a shower and you get rid of that tramp in my bed."

Linx turned away from his friend and strolled directly to the bathroom, where he closed the door and locked it for good measure. He did the three S's—shit, showered and shaved—before he towel dried his hair, threw in a little gel and dressed in a pair of faded gray,

slightly baggy jeans and a black wife beater.

He was so sick of the monotony in his life and desperately wanted a change, but he didn't have the slightest clue where to begin. He needed to stop throwing occasional fucks at Cassidy and he desperately needed to get his act together so he could be a better father to his sons.

Remembering his ex, he grabbed his Samsung Galaxy Note and voice dialed her number. She answered almost immediately.

"What the fuck took ya so long to call me?" she answered in a thick Boston accent. "I have been tryin' to

reach you for two fucking days and nothin'. If I am ringin' your phone off the hook, it's important and has nothing to do with your cock."

Linx began to pack as he put her on speaker phone. His room was empty of both Niko and the skank, so it was nice that no one had to hear his ex over the phone. She still acted like an eighteen year old although she was actually in her mid-twenties.

Frustrated beyond the point of mere anger, he threw a pair of shit kickers against the wall and ran his hands through his hair. He breathed deeply, stopped packing and

grabbed his Apple MacBook Pro as he sat on the bed beside his phone.

“Sorry, I was busy,” he responded, as he logged into his Facebook account and checked his timeline; meanwhile, he listened to her insipid conversation.

Of course, she was calling about money.

Every conversation was about money.

He knew what it was like to be poor and had grown up with less than most kids. His father drank a lot, though he was a more maudlin drunk as opposed to a violent one. It

seemed like every time his parents had sex, there was another sibling and during the fifth delivery, his mother hemorrhaged and had to have a total hysterectomy.

“What’s so important?” Linx interrupted Cassidy. “I don’t mean to be a total dick, but it’s not a good time and I have to be downstairs in ten minutes.”

“I need my alimony payment early.”

“Talk to John and have him cut you a check. He’s not in the office but you could probably drop by and he’ll understand.”

He was lucky his older brother was an attorney and had handled his divorce. He and his family also lived in Los Angeles so he knew someone would check on Brady and Jimi to make sure they were okay.

“He hates me, Lennon, and he’s gonna give me shit.”

“No, he won’t. Just tell him I sent you around and said it was okay.” He logged off Facebook, stood, grabbed the boots he’d thrown, and put them in his luggage along with his laptop after he’d placed it in its case. Linx did a quick perusal, making sure he hadn’t forgotten any items of value—sentimental or

otherwise.

“Len, honey...why did we get divorced in the first place? You’re miserable and so am I. Yeah, I know what happens on those tours, but maybe I overreacted. You never brought home any social diseases and you’re still my first love. I just want us to be...happy and the boys would love their father to be in the house,” she explained, in a quiet voice.

She was right but Linx couldn’t go back. He didn’t know why but he’d always been like that. When Cassidy kicked him out of the house, he had to spend two weeks on his

brother's sofa before he'd checked into the Chateau Marmont. He'd stayed there until the sale on his brand new house closed.

He still loved her to a certain extent—she was the mother of his children, after all—but he couldn't trust her and without trust, there wasn't a relationship. Linx always had a problem trusting women and after Cassidy's betrayal, his issue had gotten worse, not better.

“Listen, I'm in the middle of a fucking Muslim country and I don't think this is the best time to discuss our relationship, or lack thereof. I'll be back in the states in about six

weeks. We can talk about it then. In the meantime, call John and tell him you need to see him,” he said as he bent over to put on a pair of black Chuck Taylor All Stars and laced them quickly.

“I’ll have to wait another six hours or so. It’s only one twenty-three in the morning here.”

“Oh shit...I forgot about the time difference and what not. Yeah, wait until at least seven a.m. and get some rest. I’ll talk to you later.”

Linx grabbed his bag, threw the card keys on the coffee table and closed the door to his suite. He walked down the hallway and

quickly boarded the first available elevator. He met Niko downstairs in the lobby and couldn't wait until they boarded the plane. Their next stop was China, not much better, but at least he wouldn't run into women covered from head to toe with only their eyes showing.

“Bye, Lennon.”

“Bye,” he murmured, before he ended the call.

Niko began to walk side by side with him. “What’s going on with Cassidy? Is she feeling guilty? The grass is always greener when you’re gone but the moment you go back, all that old shit starts up again and

I'm tellin' you...don't do it, man. Look what happened to me. I was free and clear of the bitch and what happens? She got knocked up again. I love Heaven with all my heart, but I didn't want any more kids by that woman. I felt used and betrayed because she thought she could trap me with another baby. The only thing that happened is we now have an acrimonious relationship and she gets more child support from me."

"Yeah, I know."

He understood his best friend was going through hell. His ex, Tiffany, had once been the love of his life; they had been childhood

sweethearts.

Unfortunately, Tiffany was also Cassidy's best friend.

After they got married and Niko became famous, she changed the way all people seemed to when they weren't used to money. Niko had never cheated on her and was faithful to a fault, but Tiffany began spending money like it was water and had quite a few plastic surgery procedures.

Niko could never be there enough for her and she began to nag and complain. The final straw came when she asked him to choose between the band or her. The band

had been playing music their whole lives. What was he going to do as a house husband and how would he continue to support his family? To him it was an easy split-second decision.

They'd tried to reconcile a few years ago, but nothing came of it except another kid. The relationship had left Niko unsure and unable to trust women.

The two men were kindred spirits in that regard.

“Trust me, man—keep your eyes on the prize and remember this fucking tour is almost over,” Niko encouraged, as they walked through

the lobby of the opulent hotel.

Linx smirked. "It can't end quick enough for me."

"Amen to that, brother," Niko responded as they left the hotel walking side by side to the waiting limo to whisk them off to the airport.

Both men slid inside to find they were the last two to depart. Talia, Kris, Damira, Xander and their nanny were already inside.

"We were wondering what was taking you so long. You better hope you haven't made us late for our flight," Damira expressed in a cold

voice.

Kris had never been married and Linx wondered if he truly knew what he was getting himself into by marrying a woman who had an inside view to the lives of rockers and was no pushover. That was the bitterness inside him talking and it was unfair. Everyone deserved to be happy.

Even him.

He still believed in love and knew there was someone out there for him, yet he also knew that someone wasn't his ex-wife.

"Don't worry," he replied to the

cold-hearted bitch who sat across from him.

“Technically, Damira, they aren’t late.” Talia glared down Kaz’s ex-wife with cold, pale green eyes. “We’ll make it to the airport with more than enough time to spare.”

Linx hated to admit it, but he’d grown to like and respect their new lead singer. Not only was she extremely professional, but she didn’t take shit from anyone and she had helped form a cohesiveness in the band that had never existed before. With her song writing skills, looks and business savvy behavior of knowing the right asses to kiss, they

could easily be as big as Scarlet Fever one day. Hell, in a couple of years, they would be headlining their own concerts instead of being the warm up act for a band that had become legendary in its own right.

Not that they weren't a force to be reckoned with now. They were very good, but he had a sneaking suspicion that she would make them even better and their star power would only rise higher and brighter with Talia at the helm.

With this thought in mind, he knew absolutely that he could not go back to Cassidy. There wasn't a future for them because they'd hurt

each other too much in the past. He knew there was someone special out there for him and he couldn't wait to meet her. He would just know it, and his distrust would vanish which was the beauty of the situation.

Linx didn't second-guess himself and he always trusted his instincts.

As far as he was concerned, there was no turning back. The only way to continue his life involved moving forward and breaking all personal ties with his ex-wife that didn't strictly concern Brady and Jimi.

Chapter Five

“TO MY PRECIOUS daughter Trista, you are brilliant and I know you will excel at Stanford and make your mother and I proud.”

I smiled at my dad and his sparkling blue eyes. “Thanks, Dad. I’ll miss you and Mom like mad though.”

“You get used to it,” Tristan said, as he mussed my hair with a playful

hand while I rolled my eyes.

He knew he was the only person who could get away with such behavior. Anyone else would have gotten bitch-slapped; I absolutely hated when people touched my hair without permission.

Mom smiled at me and I was reminded why my parents were still so much in love. She was a beautiful woman with Trey's hazel-green eyes, and gorgeous, unique features. Her olive skin made her look years younger than she was—she barely looked like she was in her late thirties when she would actually celebrate her fiftieth birthday in

June.

“How’s Trey?”

She knew I spent a lot of time at the clubhouse though she didn’t mention it to Dad because she understood it would upset him. He dealt with the clubs but he didn’t respect them and the last thing he wanted was his oldest son in an MC. Dad had actually disowned Trey. Mom was the only one who asked about him at all.

“He’s fine, Mom,” Tristan interrupted, looking at me before he stared back at our mother.

“Is he still dating that porn slut?”

Dad inquired, before he sipped his scotch.

“Damn it, Timothy—must you be so crass?” Mom inquired in a soft tone. “I’m sure she’s a very nice person with ‘Daddy issues’—”

“Yeah, that pretty much describes Keri. I don’t know how he dates her. I mean, it’s her job but...I don’t think I could be with a woman that most of the American male population has seen spread-eagled, you know?” Tristan explained as he looked at Taryn who smiled shyly.

I sipped from my Evian water before I ate another bite of cheesecake.

My celebration dinner had been perfect and in a couple days, I would be out of here. The biggest issue I had at the moment was whether or not I should see Clooney again before I left. The sex between us was pretty satisfying and, though I wouldn't go so far as to call it amazing, it did the trick and kept me from feeling sexually frustrated. I probably would suffer from a major dry spell once I arrived at Stanford, so it was probably best to get laid as much as possible before I left.

“What's the matter, baby sister? You look so down.”

I stared into my brother's blue

eyes and smiled. "I'm fine. I just...it bothers me that I'm starting at another university in the middle of the school year. I mean, people have already forged friendships and maybe I should wait it out and attend next Autumn—"

"You will do no such thing, young lady." My father glared at me, and his eyes were completely serious and devoid of humor.

"That's just fear talking, Trista. You'll be fine, trust me. If anyone could charm the devil, it's you. Look how much Jonesy likes you." Tristan winked at me and I frowned back at him.

Tom “Jonesy” Hughes was the President of the Demon’s Bastards MC and he only allowed me to see Clooney without becoming a Demon scrubber in the process because he enjoyed my company and our frank discussions about politics and world events. I knew a lot about Wales, the land of his birth, and Ireland. He was half and half so he enjoyed our discussions about The Troubles in Northern Ireland along with talking about the beautiful Welsh countryside. We also shared a love for U2, so that didn’t hurt our interactions.

Mom continued to eat her

Tiramisu while our father seemed to grow grimmer by the second.

“When we get home, I would like to speak to you in private, young lady.”

“Yes, Dad.”

My brother looked at me and I returned his gaze defiantly. We both knew what that meant.

I was in deep shit.



THE RIDE BACK to our beautiful home in Pine Bluff from Lake Tahoe was uneventful. I opted to sit by myself in the third row backseat of the Escalade, while Tristan and

Taryn sat together in the middle row.

Weird shit went through my mind as I glanced out the back window every now and then. Goose bumps broke out all over my skin though the SUV was comfortable, and I suddenly became overwhelmed with an eerie feeling that we were being followed. If that was the case, they were smart, because every time one car would seem like it had traveled with us for too long, it would turn off moments later, and another late model sedan would appear.

Some looked like government

issued vehicles, while others looked like regular cars and trucks. I must have been going crazy because I started doing math in my head to calm down, before I wondered why so many of the people I knew had names starting with “T”, including my own.

My mind switched subjects again and I thought long and hard about whether I should see Clooney before I left. If my dad knew, I had a dry spell to prepare for because I’d had my last bit of sex a little over a week ago on New Year’s Day. If he was none the wiser, then the answer was yes. I would definitely risk his wrath

for an all-night sex-a-thon with my soon-to-be ex-boyfriend.

The moment we arrived home, I followed my dad into his study while my mother went to their bedroom. Tristan took Taryn to his old bedroom that he still used when he came home to visit.

I loved my dad's study with its forest green walls and cream crown molding along the ceiling. His desk was huge and made of oak. Behind it sat a comfortably large office chair. He closed his MacBook Pro and slid it next to his personal-sized printer. He had an industrial-sized copier and printer cater-corner to his desk.

I sat in one of the plush La-Z-Boy chairs he had in front of his desk and crossed my legs. His office was always chilly, probably because there were three huge windows, though the forest green curtains were shut. He took a seat and leaned forward before he placed his arms on the table and folded his hands together, as if he were going to start praying.

“Dad, it’s true. I have been at the clubhouse and yes, I have been seeing Trey though you told us all to stay away from him,” I began in a quiet voice, while my heart thundered so hard, it hurt my chest.

“It’s dangerous, Trista. Your brother is in a gang and they could hurt you just to get back at me. I still can’t believe Jonesy made him Sergeant at Arms when he knows I’m in bed with the Saints,” my dad replied with concerned, bright blue eyes.

“You’re not in bed with the Saints, Dad. You just do their books. That is quite different—”

“Not really.” He sighed quietly before he stood, walked over to his bar and poured himself a stiff Macallan 30 into a crystal glass. He strolled back to his chair and sat down again. “I never wanted this for

my children. It's why I became something as boring as an accountant. You know what your uncles are like and how they are caught up in all that shit back in Boston. It's why I moved us out here to this clean country—"

"—turns out Pine Bluff wasn't as 'clean' as you thought it would be," I interrupted. "Crime has always been a part of our family and you can't escape your demons by leaving home, Dad. I know that and I promise to be careful when I get to Stanford, if you promise me that you and Mom will look after yourselves."

My dad laughed then swigged

from his scotch. “We’re not *that* old, Trista. Believe me when I say I am making sure my family will be looked after. I worry about you and your relationship with that *boy*.”

Shit. He knew about Clooney.

“What boy?” I stalled for time as my mind raced and my heart thundered so hard in my chest, I was sure he could see the pulse point in my neck.

“That boy...Austin Clooney. The prospect they are about to vote in as a full charter member.” Dad swigged from his scotch again before he set the glass down. “I don’t relish my daughter becoming an old lady and I

want you to stay away from there. I know he was your first and I don't want to think about how he...*sullied* my little girl. You've probably said your goodbyes and once you are gone, you are to end it with him, is that understood?"

I'm shocked you didn't use the word, "deflower".

I so *did not* want to have a conversation about my sex life with my dad right now or ever to be exact. I was perfectly happy with him imagining me being a virgin forever. Catholic guilt played heavily on my mind and in my heart.

Pre-marital sex. One of the seven deadly sins as far as Catholics were concerned, right up there with birth control and abortion.

I'd committed two out of three, although it was Clooney who kept the condoms, and I thanked God there had never been any accidents because I really would have been made to be an old lady. That wasn't part of my future plans in any way, shape or form.

"Dad, I'm ending it with Clooney but I wanted to wait until I got to Stanford. It's just easier that way. No one gets hurt and we can both move on with our lives. I have no illusions

about him staying faithful to me, even if he does love me but...it's not meant to be and I know that." I tucked a lock of my silky, dark hair behind my right ear with a nervous hand that shook a little. "How did you find out?"

"Your mother. You were silly enough to be seen with him at the Boatworks Shopping Mall. You think just because it's on the California side of the border your mother never goes there? If she is on a mission, she'll venture there or Reno or even fucking Las Vegas to find what she is looking for.

"She saw you two together in the

food court. You were laughing and snuggled up close to one another. We're not idiots and we do realize that although you just turned eighteen over a month ago, you're an old soul. Neither of us expected you to be a virgin now...we were glad you waited as long as you did, but not with him. I won't have my only daughter tied up in a gang. It's unthinkable. I've already lost Trey...I refuse to lose you too."

I breathed in through my nose and exhaled through my mouth. "Dad, it's a moot point because Clooney and I aren't gonna happen. I told you that. It's over. We dated

for eighteen months and I made him wait for six months...until I turned seventeen. He was out of commission during that time anyway because his leg was all messed up due to all the surgeries—”

“Just promise me you’ll stay away from him, and Trey...and the clubhouse for two goddamn days? That’s when you leave for Stanford and I couldn’t be happier to see you get away from here.” My father looked weary and a bit aggravated but though he’d sworn, he hadn’t raised his voice to me and for that I was grateful.

“I promise, Dad.” I stood, walked

over to my dad and embraced him before I kissed his cheek. “I’m off to bed. Good night and don’t stay up too late.”

“Shouldn’t I be telling you that?”

“Why? I might read a bit before I fall asleep but I promise to be asleep at a decent hour.”

He laughed and turned back to his laptop as we separated.

My last thought before I closed the double doors to his office was I hoped I could keep my promise to stay away from Clooney.



THE PROMISE I'D made to m

father lasted less than fifteen hours. It was around noon the following day when I received a phone call.

I stared at my Samsung Galaxy S4 for a few stolen moments before I answered, “Clooney, what’s going on?”

“Listen, I know you’re leaving the day after tomorrow and you said we should end this but...I just got patched in! I couldn’t think of another person I would want to share this news with but you.”

I stood from my comfortable bed and began to pace in a pair of Victoria’s Secret logo pajama bottoms and a white cami with a

built-in shelf bra. My heart thudded in my chest as my breath came out quickly and heavily.

What the hell was I supposed to say to this news? I knew he would want to see me and I knew what those patch parties were like. Clooney was officially a Demon's Bastard and a gang member according to the state of Nevada and the United States government. Motorcycle clubs were not recognized as such, due to their usual illegal activities which made them more like gangs than any sort of social club.

"Trista, are you there?" he

inquired.

I put him on speaker phone and threw my cell phone on my bed. “I need to take a shower and get dressed. I should be there shortly.”

“Thanks, babe. I can’t wait to see you.”

“You too.”

“Love you,” he said before the call ended.

Was our relationship about love? It had to be, because we didn’t always have sex when we were together. Sometimes we just hung out and he was just content having me around. He always seemed so

proud for me to be on his arm and although I knew I was an attractive woman, I didn't understand why he was so happy to go out with me.

I was a bit maudlin and a huge nerd. My major was Business Administration with a minor in German because I wanted to work for one of the big pharmaceutical companies. That was my dream: to be a damn suit and a fucking bean counter. How was I creative or fascinating in any way?

Though I could admit to caring for Clooney, I wasn't in love with him. I could leave him behind and eventually forget he ever existed at

all. I wouldn't have been able to do that with someone I was truly in love with; my emotions were too overwhelming and the actual feeling of being apart would kill me.

My pacing stopped in front of the floor length mirror I had cater-corner to an oak armoire. I looked at myself and stared at my reflection. My long hair would need to be cut and right now, soft silky waves weaved through my dark hair with its chestnut highlights. I did the fish-lip look and did a few poses before I stuck my tongue out at my reflection.

I had a fucking club party to

pretty up for and fun times lay
ahead.

Chapter Six

TOKYO TURNED OUT to be a experience far beyond surreal for Linx.

It was a mind fuck of people, images, buildings and activity but the environment had a completely rushed, yet relaxed, quality to it. The Japanese people were polite and though he'd run into countless people by accident as he walked

down the street with Niko, they certainly didn't give him the evil eye like he would have received in South Boston or a flip-off if they were in Manhattan.

Instead, the people apologized and he found himself doing the same thing on their second day there. It was like being in a perfect homogenized society where everyone treated each other with respect and he'd never been as hyper-aware of being white in his life as he was in this perfect, Westernized society where the population just happened to be Asian.

Not even his dyed black hair could make him blend in, not with his creamy complexion, which was almost borderline alabaster territory. He and Niko tried to look as inconspicuous as possible, but even with their clothes and sunglasses, many Japanese fans knew who they were almost immediately.

They had three concerts to do in Tokyo and the first one was that night, but they'd practiced earlier and Talia had said everyone should relax and enjoy the rest of the day. Both men asked the hotel staff about interesting activities and they were

referred to Seventh Heaven, a strip club that was popular with locals and tourists.

Ten minutes inside, and Linx was ready to leave. It turned out not to be that different from any other upscale strip club he'd attended around the world. The women were beautiful but had that empty, hard look in their eyes as if the only thing they cared about was how much money a mark—or a man who was considered an easy target—had and what they could do to relieve said mark of as much cash as possible.

“This is awesome, dude,” Niko exclaimed, as a bleached blonde

woman with an Australian accent danced in front of him.

Linx smirked and drank from a bottle of Sapporo beer. “We see more pussy than this at after parties. I don’t see how this is a great way of spending our time. I should have gone to the Harajuku district with Talia and Sydney.”

“You can be such a fag sometimes —why the fuck would you want to shop here? All the men are like five foot, six inches and are lucky if they weigh more than one hundred and forty pounds soaking wet. Wait till we get to Australia to shop. Good grief. You’re missing all this top

shelf pussy worrying about shopping.”

It was times like this that Niko annoyed the hell out of him.

He stayed through two tortuous hours before they headed back to the hotel. Of course he took another shower and changed into his clothes. There was a knock on the door to his hotel suite as he slid on a leather coat. It was freezing, barely thirty-five degrees and though he'd be shrugging it off before they performed, he would wear it until they got to the Tokyo Dome.

Linx strolled over to answer it, stepping back as he faced Talia who

wore a leather, sleeveless cat suit and comfortable black Doc Martens on her feet. She'd recently had a tat sleeve done from below her elbow to just above her wrist on her left arm and it was out on display.

“It’s addicting, isn’t it?” he inquired, motioning to her arm, for lack of anything else to say.

She was an intimidating figure and usually didn’t show up at the other member’s hotel rooms until about two hours before show time, so he wondered whether he was in trouble or she truly needed to talk.

“Yeah, it is.” She walked in past him and he closed the door behind

her.

They all had Park suites at the Park Hyatt and although they were small, they were luxurious and quite large in regards to what the Japanese were familiar with in terms of size; therefore, he didn't complain. All he needed was a place to lay his head at the end of the night. He was traveling by himself and the suite was adequate enough.

Linx sat next to her on his unmade bed and she stared into his eyes, her pale green irises bright and a stark contrast to her gorgeous face. "We haven't spoken much and you seem to be the quiet, introspective

member of the band so I wanted to make sure everything was okay.”

He laughed out loud before he replied, “I was talking about your new tattoo half-sleeve. I’m fine, I don’t have an issue with you being the head vagina in charge and if I am a bit maudlin, it has nothing to do with the band and everything to do with my own personal life.”

Talia grinned. “You have an excellent sense of humor. I didn’t think you had an issue with me anymore, but when we sit down to write the music for these little lyrics I have, I want to have your input too.”

“You’ll get it,” he said in a quiet voice.

She grabbed his right hand with her left and held on tightly. “I love him too, Linx. My personal life—what’s going on between Jaden and I—doesn’t negate the emotions I have for Seth but he couldn’t have stayed. Not after he overdosed and almost died in Copenhagen—it was obvious then he needed help unless he did it for the attention and I don’t think he would be that reckless with his life. I begged Dom to allow him to keep a job in Winter’s Regret. Without this band, he wouldn’t want to live, and do you

honestly think I want his death on my conscience?”

He closed his eyes and breathed deeply. She was right and the band hadn't been in a great place because he, Niko and Kris had walked on eggshells around Seth. It was for the best that he was gone and getting cleaned up. The last thing any of them should have had to deal with was a druggie for a lead singer.

Linx knew he wasn't a saint. He liked his chronic and every now and then, he would have a couple of lines of coke to take the edge off, but that was as far as he took it. He'd never messed with anything in the

opiate family because he had cousins who were Oxy-heads or addicted to “the Blues” or “hillbilly heroin” as it was called back in Boston.

“I know you had his best interests at heart, Talia.” Linx swallowed hard and felt his Adam’s apple bob. “Listen, what you do with your personal life is none of my business. My own is really fucked up right now and when this tour is over, I can start to piece everything back together. I need to be kept busy with work because it means money, and money means I can shut my ex up as long as I continue to

take care of her.”

Talia let his hand go and ran hers through her red-streaked dark hair. “I know. It was all I thought about when Seth did what he did to us. I was so afraid Dom was just going to tear up our contract, and I understand both you and Niko have families to take care of...this isn’t just some gig—this is your livelihood that asshole played with, and I wanted to make sure you two were compensated.”

Linx glared at her with cold blue eyes. “What do you mean? What did you do?”

“Seth is going to have to pay for

his own treatment. Introspect would have picked up the tab but I talked to Dom and the money he lost due to being at Promises and not on tour will be given to you and Niko. I had Dom transfer it into your bank accounts. You shouldn't have to worry about your job and now you won't have to. I need you to sign off on me officially becoming the lead singer. Kris will vote in my favor but you and Niko...you have to agree too. I'm not buying your vote but I thought you could both use the extra money."

"How much money are we talking about?"

“Roughly thirty grand each. Probably closer to forty-five grand because Dom wants Seth to spend a minimum of six weeks in rehab. The drug rehabilitation center costs about sixty grand per month.”

Linx whistled out loud. “I am so glad I have never had an alcohol or drug dependency problem. That money is coming out of Seth’s check?”

“His cut, yeah.” Talia rolled her eyes. “It seems like a lot of money but this tour is going to make us megabucks and all this constant exhaustion we’re feeling won’t be in vain. I promise you.

“I am not saying he won’t miss it in his cut, because he never completed the tour but that isn’t our problem. He did this to himself and he has to pay the consequences.”

All Linx could think about was how he could pocket that money and have his brother transfer it to his offshore account, the one Cassidy had no idea existed. He had most of his money in his Cayman Islands accounts; when they divorced, she was shocked he wasn’t worth more than what their joint bank account balances indicated.

“By the way, how much do you pay your wife each month?”

“You mean ex-wife? Five grand plus all household bills. The mortgage is paid off on the house so it isn't like I am paying through the nose and it is certainly manageable. Believe me, Trista, it's nothing I can't handle.”

Talia pursed her lips. “It could always be worse. You could have been Tiger Woods.”

“The women who came forward were much better looking than the skank she caught me on tape with... and I'm not worth half a billion dollars. The judge deemed it to be fair since it was less than thirty percent of my income according to

my bank statements.”

He smiled at her with devilish eyes. “Cassidy barely graduated from high school...math isn’t her strong suit and she grew up as one of four girls in a German-Irish Catholic household. Her dad barely made thirty grand a year and she gets sixty-five thousand a year for doing nothing but having two kids by me? She was thrilled with the settlement even though she is always broke before the end of the month, and I still give her money when she needs it.”

Talia shook her head as she stood. “Cassidy better hope you

remain single because no woman is going to put up with that. You taking care of your sons is one thing but giving her money because she can't budget? That's bullshit, Linx. You're way more of a softy than I had you pegged for. Just goes to show you looks can be deceiving."

"You got that right," he replied, as he walked her to the door. "I thought you were a pretty face with a great voice and not much else. It's nice to know I was wrong and I apologize. I had no right to dislike you because you have single-handedly brought back Winter's Regret from the brink."

She smiled then. “I should have... it was supposed to be my band, remember?”

Linx looked away and thought about the shit they talked as nine year old kids, hoping it would never come back to haunt him.

“Yeah, I remember.”

“If anyone should understand the situation, it’s you and Niko. You two know what went down all those years ago. You knew he wasn’t singing original work, yet his name is on every one of those songs in the credits as the song writer along with you, Kris and Niko. He didn’t even credit me and you know the songs

on your last two albums were based on poems I wrote to him.

“So, when you get ready to call me a bitch or a cunt, remember I could sue him but I won’t. I’ll let him keep the money because I plan on taking this band farther than he ever could, and when I do, I’ll be given credit, so it’s no skin off my nose. They were all bullshit poems anyway, the meandering thoughts of a maudlin teenager. I’ve written better songs for Chyna Bleu without half the effort.”

“See you downstairs in ten minutes,” Linx finally said, after an uncomfortable silence settled

between them.

“That’s fine. We’re gonna rock Tokyo tonight so chin up. Learn to smile. You’re a very sexy specimen when you do and women find confident alpha males attractive, Linx. Stop hiding under the emo-beta persona your ex-wife has superimposed on you, because we both know you were never that. I remember you when we lived in Boston. And it’s nice to know some people, like Cassidy, simply don’t have the capability to change, but you do. Know your worth and own it. You’re highly talented and you will get a lot more out of this life

when you grab it by the balls, rather than trying to quietly get through life with the least amount of effort involved.”

Linx didn't know what to say to a comment like that. Instead he said nothing and looked at her with a wry smile before he closed the door.

It was easier to take on life one day at a time. If he tried to focus on the bigger picture, it might just destroy his peace of mind and he clung to that with everything inside him. He couldn't afford to be careless and he refused to allow anyone inside.

Love was a pain he couldn't

afford at the moment.

He finished getting ready and closed the door to his suite before he walked down the hallway and waited to board the elevator.

Niko met up with him as he stepped inside and smirked with quiet arrogance. "Tonight, I'll let you call first dibs so you won't get stuck with that skank like you did in Dubai. Deal?"

They slammed knuckles against one another. "Sounds like a plan, brother."

Faceless sex with a random groupie was easier and it

safeguarded his heart. He was still a man after all and needed to get laid.

What the fuck did love have to do with the pursuit of carnal knowledge anyway?

Chapter Seven

I WALKED AROUND Clooney patch party and thanked God this would be one of the last club events I would be forced to attend.

It had been exactly three hours since it'd started, and after a quick, sweaty session of urgent, angry sex in his room, we emerged and both mingled. I pretended I didn't see my brother take him back to the room

they used for church, and grabbed a Heineken after I chased a shot of strong Macallan with Keri before we settled on a comfy sofa.

“What do you think they’re talking about?” I questioned out loud, though I didn’t think she would have much to say.

She stretched, crossing long, slender legs out on display in a short white skirt, and the pink angora sweater showing toned stomach. The pink, patent leather knee-high, hooker boots she wore matched her sweater.

“You, darlin’. Trey is spelling it out to him that if he wants to stay in

the club then he is going to back the fuck away from you and let you live your life peacefully at Stanford,” she replied as she drank half her Budweiser in a couple of swigs and burped loudly.

The blood in my veins began to boil. “You are *kidding*, right? Who the *hell* does he think he is?”

“Well, your older brother for one, and he doesn’t want you to become a piece of club ass. You’re better than that and he isn’t afraid to let anyone know that either. He’s incredibly protective over you and he isn’t going to let a newbie member like Clooney think he has

any power. The first part of that lesson is stripping *you* from him.”

I drank from my Heineken before I stood and walked directly to the closed double doors. I heard nothing but the rush of blood in my ears and a thundering heart, which beat with wild intensity in my chest. I was so pissed at Trey, I could have killed him myself at that very moment.

I opened the doors and saw Trey and Clooney sitting close to one another. They both stood from the table before my brother said, “Close the fucking door, Trista, and join us.”

Who the hell did he think he was?

I did as I was told before I walked over and stood between the two men, one being my over-protective brother and the other being my boyfriend and first “love”, if I could call being mildly infatuated with a guy I was used to having sex with, love.

Trey grabbed my right arm and pulled me toward him before he glared at Clooney with cool hazel-green eyes. “Don’t you have something to tell my sister?”

Clooney’s face turned beet red from the neck up as he mumbled, “You don’t belong here and you

should go. We're through. I'm ending what we have right now."

What. The. Fuck.

My boyfriend was dumping me, when all along I planned to dump him when I arrived at Stanford. I felt guilty as hell about my decision, but no longer, as his steel gray eyes met mine and they were cold as frosted glass.

The tears came whether I wanted them to or not and soon I had torn my arm from Trey's grip and embraced Clooney. "You don't mean that. I don't know what could happen but there might be a future between us. You never know!"

He grabbed me by the shoulders as he stepped back out of my personal space. “You and I both know there is *nothing* between us. I love you but I can’t make you live a life you don’t want and we both know you will *never* be any man’s old lady.”

I wiped the tears away savagely and gathered my dignity off the floor. “Fine. You want to end it like this? It’s done and we are fucking over!”

“Trista, the club has to come first and I have no choice—”

I didn’t bother to stick around for his pitiful excuses. I was too drunk

to drive the family Ford Explorer but I got in and sped out of the compound like my ass was on fire.

Clooney was a free agent now because he'd ended it with me and not the other way around. The sudden change of events had me seeing red but I drove cautiously and blasted Winter's Regret latest album.

“You’re a soul destroyer and you kill me with kindness and sweet kisses but in the end, you’ll just leave me. I don’t want to believe in you, but I have no choice if I want to be free. Inside your eyes, your soul is pure and bright. Don’t you dare put out the

light and leave me empty and bleeding. I would never recover and love is so fucking fleeting...promise me you'll always be here for me! Kiss me, take me, fuck me, be fake with me but just don't leave me."

I turned up the song, "Ugly Love" and the tears slowly leaked from my eyes again. I knew it was Trey's doing and Clooney didn't want to end it with me. Unfortunately the club didn't work that way and since my brother was Sergeant at Arms, he could order anything he wanted. I despised him at that moment, though he'd forced me to keep the promise I'd made the day before.

Clooney and I were officially over and the only thing I could do was cry. I felt pretty pathetic.



I ARRIVED HOME to an empty house.

My parents weren't there and I wondered if they were working late. I was also concerned about where Tristan and Taryn were and immediately voice dialed his phone.

"Yo, what up, baby sis?" he greeted in an enthusiastic voice.

"Where are you and Taryn?"

He immediately picked up on my maudlin attitude. "We're with Mom

and Dad. Remember I told you about wanting to ask Taryn to marry me? I need to get their permission first and if they agree then we'll have a huge engagement party."

"What about Dizzy Cox? You aren't worried about becoming engaged to his niece and what he might do?"

"Maeve gave her permission it was okay...she's Taryn's mother. I don't give a fuck what Dizzy thinks to be honest." He was obviously outside, as I heard noises around him and knew he was smoking since he was talking in a normal voice.

"Sounds reasonable," I

murmured, before the tears tumbled down my cheeks. There I was, little Ms. Waterworks crying yet again like a freakin' sixteen year old who had been dumped by the quarterback in high school.

“Oh, man...so Trey followed through and spoke with Clooney, huh?”

I grabbed a handful of Kleenex and wiped my eyes before blowing my nose. “How did you know?”

“Dad called him this morning and he told him if he wanted access to this family again, he would make that no-good bastard end your relationship. Trey has always hated

how Dad turned his back on him. He wants to be part of our family again—don't you understand that?—and what a better way to do it? I'm sorry you got hurt in the process but I thought you were going to dump him when you got to California?"

"I was," I said in a soft voice, "but it would have been my decision to make and now that it's been taken away from me. I'm unreasonably resentful and angry."

Tristan laughed out loud on the other end. "At the end of the day, does it really matter who *ended* it? The deed is over and done with, and

now you're free to find a guy who is worthy of your time and affection. You can mess with any guy at Stanford and you get to leave without that shit hanging over your head. It's what we all thought you *wanted*."

"I did but I wanted it to happen on my terms—not yours, not Dad's and certainly not Trey's. It's like he started swinging his dick around because he has power in the club and could make Clooney do what he wanted him to do. Even Keri knew about it before I did. Why didn't anyone warn me? There I was slobbering like an idiot for him not

to leave me, and the decision had already been made by people way above his fucking pay grade.”

“Listen, I had nothing to do with it. This all falls on Trey, and to me, he did the right thing.” My brother sighed quietly. “Would you rather be with Clooney knowing what you were going to do or have Trey back in our lives? Properly, this time. No more sneaking around and going to the clubhouse to see him. Dad said he could come by whenever he wanted. I don’t know how you feel, but I have missed my older brother. There were times I could have really used him and every time I went to

the clubhouse to see him, I felt guilty.

“I’m not a deceitful person by nature and I didn’t like defying Dad. This way, neither one of us have to, and if all it cost you was a boyfriend you were gonna get rid of anyway, then what’s the big deal? I know you’re upset now, but you know it’s for the best, and it’s one less burden for you take with you to Stanford. That’s all I have to say about the situation.”

“You’re right,” I replied, and wiped my tear stained cheeks. “We can talk about this when you get home but I really hope Mom and

Dad allow you to marry Taryn. She's a sweet girl and I really would love to have her as a future sister-in-law."

"Yeah, she feels the same, especially when she found out Talia was our cousin. She loves Winter's Regret and almost fainted when she heard they are going to re-record the first two albums with Talia singing."

"I know." I sat up in bed and stared at my Facebook timeline on my HP laptop. "I've seen some of the concerts they've performed on YouTube and I still can't believe that is our cousin up there. She looks amazing and happy."

“One day, you’ll be happy too, sis. The pain will go away because there is an irresistibly hot guy out there for you, and he is going to rock your world and turn you inside out. The beauty of the situation is you’ll never see him coming.”

I smiled at this statement because no matter how pissed off or immature I acted at times, Tristan always saw the silver lining in every cloud of despair. He was such an upbeat person and I was more than delighted to call him my brother.

“You’re right. I look forward to good news tonight.”

“I look forward to telling you

some good news tonight—both Taryn and I do.”

“Bye for now and I love you, big brother.”

“I love you more, baby sister.”

He ended the call and I set my cell phone on the bedside oak table before I picked up my Kindle Fire HD and began the latest novel by one of my favorite indie authors. It was a rock and roll novel and I couldn't wait to dig in after it'd seemed to burn a hole in my tablet for over a week.

I have always loved to read and enjoy it, though I had to admit I

didn't get to do it as much I would have liked. Now that I didn't have a boyfriend, I could catch up on my endless To-Be-Read list and update my Goodreads page. It was little things like this—reading and listening to my favorite bands on my iPod docked into my clock radio—I'd missed while dating Clooney.

My favorite playlist was the perfect soundtrack for reading. A mixture of Winter's Regret, Deftones, Fall Out Boy, Scarlet Fever and some "girl power" courtesy of Rihanna, Trilogy, Ke\$ha, P!nk, and Ellie Goulding, I was in music heaven.

I must have dozed off because I awoke to Trilogy's "Endless Pain". My Kindle had turned itself off and I sat up before I placed it next to my phone. I paused the iPod and listened to the quiet house before I heard it again, hard knocks on the front double doors followed by an incessant ring from the doorbell.

My first instinct was completely numbing, while my stomach twisted into knots and I felt like upchucking the food and alcohol I'd consumed earlier that evening. I sat up and crawled off the bed before I walked straight to the coat closet where my dad kept a .22 just in case. I knew

how to use it like every other young person in the country. We lived in the wild heart of the North, where guns were still a necessity and parents didn't lock up their stock; instead they taught their children about the power of guns and we learned how to handle the weapons with respect and a last resort measure.

“Don't ever place a gun in your hand if you aren't prepared to end someone's life, you got that?” my dad had told me a long time ago, and I'd nodded vigorously.

If I hadn't been the only person in the house, I wouldn't have even

thought about grabbing the weapon.

The hard knocking came again, followed by the doorbell chimes.

“Who is it?” I questioned loudly, while still ten feet away from the double doors.

“Sheriff Briggs, Pine Bluff Police Department, Ms. Lennon.”

I breathed a sigh of relief and slipped the gun inside my father’s black wool coat, which hung on a nearby coat rack. I smoothed my hair and opened one of the heavy oak doors.

The Sheriff stood there with two of his Deputies. Their police lights

lit up the police cruisers parked in the circular driveway and they all looked tired and worn out.

The tears came, despite my best effort to stop them. “Yes?”

Briggs had an interesting face. Half-Washoe Native American, a quarter black and a quarter Irish, his café au lait complexion was smooth and clear while his light brown eyes and Washoe facial features made him seem almost like a wax statue. He was a stocky man, though he was pure muscle and could have been mistaken for Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson’s brother.

His wife was Welsh—the cousin

of Lorna Hughes, Jonesy's old lady—and although he wasn't a bent cop, he let the Demon's Bastards get away with a lot as long as they kept the violence out of Pine Bluff. He didn't have much of a choice, due to his ties through marriage with the club.

“What's going on, Sheriff?” I wondered out loud in a shaky voice.

I started to mentally count down from one hundred, just to steady my wildly beating heart and shortness of breath.

“Trista, I'm so sorry. It's about your family and your brother's fiancée...can we come in? You might

want to be seated for the news.”

My chest heaved up and down as I began to have a full-on panic attack. The only sound that kept me grounded was the roaring of a Harley down our circular driveway. Trey parked quickly, took off his helmet, and ran past the cops who tried to stop him before he ran to my side and embraced me.

“I came as soon as I heard,” he whispered in my ear, before he faced me with tear-filled, hazel-green eyes. “What’s going on, Briggs? The officers wouldn’t tell me a goddamn thing at the clubhouse. Only that there was an accident and my baby

sister was at home alone.”

“Trey, I am going to have to advise you to take your sister into the living room.”

I still clung to my oldest brother before I whispered to him, “I need a pill before I hear the news.”

“Can you give me five fucking minutes alone with my sister?” he yelled at the Sheriff.

Briggs looked at his deputies, turned our way again and reluctantly nodded his head. “Make it quick.”

Trey and I walked to my room and I kind of sunk to the floor next

to my open door. I was still in the throes of a full anxiety attack and it wasn't pretty. I breathed heavily, my heart thundered in my chest and I felt light-headed and not at all like myself. He knew where my Xanax was stashed and slid a two milligram tablet in my mouth and shoved a bottle of water in my hand.

The pill dissolved in my mouth without the aid of the water and it tasted bitter and disgusting, the paste of it clinging to my tongue and throat.

“Drink some water, sweetie.”

I finally lifted the bottle to my lips and drank half the contents. I

could feel it starting to numb me, but it wouldn't destroy the pain in my heart, and I still didn't know exactly what was going on.

Trey took me in his arms and sat next to me and as he stroked my hair. "I'm so sorry, honey. I can't help feeling like all this shit is my fault."

"What did you do?" I wondered out loud.

He didn't answer.

"What the fuck did you do, Trey?" I began to beat his chest with my fists and he didn't try to fight me, but two police officers came in

and pulled me off my brother.

“Goddamn it, I need you two to act like adults here!” Briggs exclaimed as he entered my bedroom.

My head felt light and completely empty. “What happened to my parents, Tristan and Taryn?”

The Sheriff met my eyes wearily. “They’re dead. Car explosion off Highway 580. We identified the vehicle by what was left of the license plate. I’m sorry, but by the time we got to the scene, there couldn’t have possibly been any survivors. Trista, Trey—I’m so very sorry for your loss.”

“My dad doesn’t drink when he has to drive...were they run off the road?” Trey questioned in a cold voice, heavily-laden with sadness.

“We don’t know all the details, and won’t for a while. When we do, you two will be the first to know. Let us do our job, Trey.”

A scream echoed in the room, and I didn’t realize it was my own voice until I collapsed on the floor. I cried so hard, I thought my heart would collapse and my head would explode.

Trey immediately peeled me off the floor and slid me under the covers of my comfortable bed.

“You guys can go now, I’ll stay with my sister. Oh, and until you know any useful information, don’t fucking return.”

I clung to my brother as the sobs overtook me and my heart broke apart, piece by piece.

Snapshots in time of Tristan, Trey and I when we were still together, happy and a family. Our loving parents. Mom singing me a lullaby so I would drift off to sleep. My father reading me a chapter out of *Black Beauty*, one of my favorite novels, when I was little. Tristan and I talking about how he knew he was in love with Taryn for the first

time.

It wouldn't have been Lucifer's Saints behind this. They had too much to lose and the relationship between them and the Bastards wasn't exactly cordial but it wasn't acrimonious either.

That left only one group who hated my family enough to destroy us.

The White Knights Motorcycle Club.

Chapter Eight

LINX PRACTICED WITH the rest of the band for the final Winter's Regret concert in Tokyo. After that, they had one other pit stop, Malaysia, before they finally flew to Australia.

The song they were working on ended and Talia advised them all to take a break, before she set her mike on the stand and pulled her phone

out the back of her jean pocket. She had a couple of phones, including a Samsung Galaxy S4 for personal calls and a Galaxy Note for business and acquaintance calls.

“Hello? Trey? What the hell are you blowing up my phone about?”

Linx handed his bass to his personal guitar technician, and half-listened to her phone call while he checked the messages on his own cell phone.

“Oh my God. Well, when is the funeral? I can’t be there because of this fucking tour, but I will help financially any way I can. How’s Trista?”

There was a missed call from Cassidy and a text message.

Cassidy Monroe-Carter: *When you get back home, I think it is time we talk about you and me. xo*

As far as Linx was concerned, there was no him and her anymore, because he had absolutely no intention of going back to her. He quickly texted a reply.

Linx Carter: *You're wasting your time, babe. There is no U & me. Time for you to face that and move the fuck on. We tried that reconciliation shit in the past. Didn't work then, wouldn't*

work now.

He hated to sound so cold and callous but Cassidy was the kind of person who did not respond well to kindness. Once a person gave her an inch, the bitch would take a motherfucking mile. That's just the kind of human being she was and he had no time for her fucked up behavior.

Talia ended her call and slowly sat down on the stage before she collapsed into tears.

Linx looked toward her usual savior, but Kris and Damira were quietly fighting off stage in the

corner, and he had no idea what had just happened. Niko had left the stage shortly after she called break, and he was the only person to hear what actually had gone down over the phone.

He wasn't the type to pry but he walked over anyway and knelt before her. Talia looked up, her eyes red, their bright green irises a contrast against pin-point pupils.

She embraced him and sobbed on his shoulder. He wanted to ask what happened but that seemed rude and besides, he knew real grief. Hell, he'd experienced it and gone through it. This wasn't an act. What

ever happened was major and painful and something she may not want to talk about.

As they separated, Talia stared at him. “My aunt and uncle...my cousin and his fiancée—they were killed in a car accident and I can’t make it to the funeral because we’re stuck on this fucking tour.”

“Oh, fuck, Tal, I’m so sorry to hear that. Maybe we can call up Dominic and explain the situation.”

“No.” Talia shook her head and looked down. “I can’t go because... my cousin is a Demon’s Bastard and if Jaden found out...” she trailed off.

All the sudden, the picture became clear.

Talia had all sorts of secrets and skeletons in that closet of hers, and a big one was that she had a cousin who was a major player in a rival MC to her lover's. How hadn't Jaden put two and two together by now?

"I take it he doesn't know. Why the secrecy?" Linx grabbed a Camel out of his coat pocket and lit it.

Talia bit her lip. "They live in the small Northern Nevada town of Pine Bluff and they're my *family*. Not everyone is involved in the MC. That's not the kind of people they were. Trista is going to Stanford

University and this is—*was*—Tristan's last year at UNLV. My aunt and uncle were fucking accountants for Christ's sake and they lived in an upper middle-class, well established community. It's only Trey that tarred the family name."

Linx stared at her and watched as her eyes hardened. "This is the life I chose and sometimes shit happens and you don't get to be there for your family. Trista is going to need more than enough help and Trey won't be there for her. I can do more for my cousin if I finish this goddamn tour than leaving now."

"I know a thing or two about

loss, Talia. It's completely your decision and I respect you no matter what. I know you had some tough times in Boston and I know how you fought for the position you have now. No matter what you decide, just know that I will support and back you one hundred percent.

“You have earned my respect. Regardless what kinds of backhanded games Seth tries to play, just know that Kris, Niko and I will always be there for you, got it? You have single-handedly resurrected this band and don't you dare think none of us are aware of that.”

She shoved her phone into her back pocket and grabbed Linx's hands. "Promise me something. You won't tell anyone else about this. Not Niko or Kris...this has to remain our secret. Trista's life might still be in danger and I can't risk too many people knowing where she will end up. My parents' house isn't secure enough and she won't want to go back east anyway.

"I will pay for her to go to UCLA if she likes, but I want her to stay with me. At least we have security guards and all that crap—bottom line is, we're always protected. Please don't tell anyone what you

found out. This goes no further. It's the only way."

Linx looked at her with bright, determined eyes. "You have my word. I swear on my son's lives I won't tell anyone."

"Thank you." She walked off the stage in defeat and he knew where she would end up, but first, she needed a place to cry in private.

Life was a bitch and then some.

He had no idea who her cousin was but, if Talia was taking the situation this hard, it must have been hell for the young woman whose life had become a waking

nightmare and his heart ached for her.



THAT NIGHT, THOUGH Linx knew how much pain Talia was in, she performed one of the best shows of her life and the band, simply following her lead, did the same. She'd quietly asked Linx if he knew "Paradise" by Coldplay and of course he did. He listened to all kinds of emo-rock, along with tons of hip-hop and neo-soul. Yes, he was in a rock band but he could appreciate every genre of music from blues to country; pop to dance.

It was the one area of his life where he didn't discriminate. Good music was simply good music regardless of what genre it fell into.

He was one of those old school musicians who believed that to be the best, it was essential to listen to the best, and there were so many legends in every genre.

The last song they performed that night was an acoustic version of "Paradise".

Although Linx considered himself a lousy electric guitar player, his first guitar had been a second hand acoustic, not a bass. He could play with his eyes closed; he knew

the acoustic guitar so well.

She dedicated it to “All the lost souls who have been stripped of their way out and to the many who would always dream of a better life.” The rest of the band could have walked off the stage, but by the second set of verses, Niko had added drums and Kris started on the guitar, practicing quieter, more haunting strings to play as opposed to his usual preference.

Even without an orchestra, Talia nailed the song and the Japanese fans went wild. Apparently, Coldplay had a huge audience in Japan and they were blown away by

Talia's version of the haunting song.

By the time Linx got back to his hotel room, he had a young, impressionable, yet intelligent Japanese fan on his arm. Maiko was gorgeous, in university and studying for a degree in journalism. That was what attracted him to her in the first place. Her English was flawless and she was a beautiful woman with long blacker-than-black hair, brown eyes and golden skin with a heart-shaped face, small frame and a body made for sin.

She sat down on his bed as he removed an expensive bottle of Dassai 50 sake from his private bar

and two heavy clay sake cups to drink the beverage. Maiko watched as he opened and poured with precision, before he walked over and handed one to her.

“Thank you,” she said in her clear English. “You’re such a gentleman for a rock star who is only going to share one night with me.”

Linx smiled for the first time. “Perhaps I don’t see you as just someone sharing my bed. You are an intelligent and beautiful woman, after all. If you don’t want to have sex with me, we don’t have to. I really appreciate your company and it’s been a long time since I felt like

this but to be honest, I didn't feel like being alone and you seemed like the perfect person to spend my evening with."

"I'm glad I could accommodate you." Maiko sipped from her sake.

Linx downed his and appreciated the fruity flavors and the aftertaste. "No, the accommodation is all mine. I've had a shitty run with women lately but perhaps it's because I have treated them like disposable pieces of trash and that isn't right. Being here, with you tonight, makes me feel like I have redeemed myself somewhat."

She downed her sake, stood and

brought the bottle over before she sat down again. “I don’t understand. You’re this famous guy and women are going to want to be with you. Perhaps some hold delusions of grandeur, but most know what they are getting into. They will fuck you and then they will be asked to leave. That’s just how it is.

“I have been to my share of rock concerts and because my Dad is who he is, it’s quite easy for me to get back stage passes. Most rock stars are jerks. I get a few questions answered and it helps toward the degree I am trying to achieve in Journalism but rarely do I go home

with one. They seem to have some kind of misplaced stereotype that all Asian women are easy, when that simply isn't true."

Linx had another sake shot with Maiko, then set his cup down. "I don't think you're easy at all. I have been all around the world and women are the same...I mean, some women just want to fuck a rock star but I don't get that from you at all."

He cupped her face in his hands. "I think you are beautiful and extremely intelligent. We can do whatever you want to do and nothing more. You got that? If you aren't attracted to me then I

understand.”

“That’s the problem,” she whispered with a soft voice, before her doe-eyes met his. “I am attracted to you and I do want you to take me...sexually.”

Linx leaned over and kissed her lips. That night, he had sex with Maiko but it wasn’t the usual experience. He didn’t love her, but he did care about her feelings and he made sure she had an orgasm.

It was the most meaningful sexual experience he’d had the whole tour and it proved something to himself. As he held her in his arms afterwards, it proved he wasn’t

emotionally dead and he could give a shit.

That meant it was possible for him to love a woman, and that feeling delighted him. He slept better that night than he had since the tour had begun.

Chapter Nine

I WAS EMOTIONALLY numb for the following days to come.

Life seemed meaningless and empty. What was the point of everything, when love brought nothing but pain? It was much easier to hate because at least hate gave you a goal to work towards, a task that needed to be accomplished to squash that feeling for vengeance.

I could understand how Trey had grown so hard over the years and although we had a love/hate relationship, he would never *not* be my favorite brother and the one I always looked up to. Had that admiration caused me to be blinded by what he was capable of? I couldn't help but wonder if he'd done something to cause this awful situation.

Sheriff Briggs came by a couple days after the accident. Trey had moved back in and taken his old bedroom because he didn't want me to stay alone. It meant I had to put up with Keri and her skanky porn

star friends, but overall, they were decent and respected my privacy.

Lorna Hughes sent over enough food to feed an army and also came by to visit. The MCs—both the Demon's Bastards and Lucifer's Saints—called a truce since Dizzy had lost his niece in the accident.

Briggs only informed Trey and I that my mother, father, Tristan and Taryn had been murdered in the accident. The brake fluid was dangerously low and looked like it the vehicle had been tampered with, mechanically-speaking. It was quite dangerous indeed, since it was snowing and that meant my father

had no way of stopping.

Pine Bluff Police Department had no witnesses or suspects, so although it was considered murder, it would go into their unsolved crime files.

I wondered around in a Xanax induced haze and drank more than I ate. I didn't have an appetite. I couldn't even think about all the funeral arrangements. The Bastards' had arranged it since it was one of their own who'd been affected.

My parents had left me very well off; there were stocks, bonds and a trust, but none of it could be touched until I turned twenty-five so

for the time being, I was given a thirty thousand per year stipend and any university of my choice would be paid for but that was about it. The house had been paid off and there would be no way I would sell it, nor could I stand for anyone to live there if they weren't family.

Trey offered to look after it and I handed over a set of keys, reluctantly, before I locked up everything in a floor safe that anyone might be interested in. No one knew about it except my late parents, Tristan and I because my father had it installed after Trey had left the house.

I took the opportunity to clear out my mother and father's client files, my dad's laptop and any mementos from my family that I didn't want accidentally destroyed or stolen and placed them in the safe as well. Trey had gone to town and Keri was around with a couple of her friends, but they were in the sitting room and had no idea what I was doing.

After everything was packed away, I locked the floor safe, replaced the Persian carpet and slowly moved my father's heavy oak desk over it again. The curtains were closed because I was paranoid as

hell and since we still didn't know who had ordered the hit on my parents or my brother, we knew I couldn't stay.

I also knew I wouldn't be attending Stanford University either and called the school to explain my situation. They promised to hold my position until the Autumn quarter of 2014 and I thanked them, but I knew my dreams were over. I would never attend that school. Too many bad memories were associated with me going there and I would end up flunking out.

The afternoon before the funeral, I sat in my room with a strong glass

of Macallan. I'd just taken another Xanax and I was tired yet, I stared at the same page on my Kindle Fire. I'd read the exact passage a dozen times and the words still hadn't been comprehended by my brain. I didn't even know what the hell was going on in the story or why I was reading the novel at all.

I was in such a fog, I'd put "Up in the Air" on auto-repeat and it must have played at least thirty times in a row before I felt my phone buzz under my ass where it'd slipped. I grabbed it and looked at the number. There was a gorgeous photo of my cousin, Talia, and I

immediately answered it.

“Hello?”

“Hey, sweetie. How are you doing? Fuck...that’s such a stupid question. I’m so sorry about Aunt Netty, Uncle Tim, Tristan and his girlfriend. You know I would give anything to be there, but I am stuck half way around the world in Malaysia at the moment,” she explained quickly, in a husky voice.

“I know, Tal, and it’s cool. I mean, no one expected you to show up. Your mom and step-father are coming to the funeral and they want me to come live with them, but I don’t want to go back east. It would

just be more cold weather,” I rambled on and knew I sounded as drunk and out of it as I was, but I couldn’t be bothered to give a damn.

“Yeah, I knew they would offer you a place to stay.” Talia sighed on the other end and I knew she had a proposition. Whatever it was, I knew I would say yes because it would be so much cooler to stay with my cousin, the rock star, than my aunt and uncle.

“Are you offering me refuge?” It seemed the appropriate word at the same time.

My cousin laughed out loud. “I wouldn’t call it that but I don’t think

Pine Bluff is the safest place for you at the moment. Trey called me and I was going to offer before he suggested it but...I need you to keep yourself busy. You can't sit around and mope all day, high on Xanax and drinking like a fish. I want you to be my PA."

It was my turn to laugh. "Tal, I was offered a place at Stanford University. In case you aren't following current events, it's an Ivy-fucking-League school and you want me to trade that in to be your personal *assistant*? What am I doing? Picking up your dry cleaning and making sure your fucking

schedule is correct or something?”

“Listen...I’m pregnant, Trista. And before you ask, it isn’t Seth’s baby. I need you here and you wouldn’t be my PA...exactly...but it’s the only way I could get you here on Introspect’s payroll. The job pays thirty grand a year. Your parents’ stipend and that salary plus what I give you, will keep you in the money. You won’t be a millionaire until you’re twenty-five, but realize you’ll be making more than the average American, so don’t bitch and complain.”

Of course she knew I would take the job because I needed to get out

of town and I had no wish to live in Connecticut. Even if it paid peanuts, I would have accepted it; my options were limited at the moment.

“Yeah, sure, of course. You’ll need help with the baby and—”

“I’m hiring a nanny, but it would be nice for you to be here. You’re my baby cousin and you have just gone through an extremely traumatic event. I don’t want to be alone here in L.A. and I don’t want you to be by yourself either. Please say yes.”

My mind was a jumble of images and pictures of both the living and the dead. I couldn’t stay in this house much longer. It would drive

me absolutely bat shit crazy. I sipped from my Macallan scotch and welcomed the burn as the liquid slid down my throat.

“Of course I will be there. When do you want me to arrive? When the tour is completed?”

“I am sending you the ticket information now. Just stay there until I get back from tour and try not to make a mess. Your flight leaves the day after the funeral. I got you an afternoon flight, all right? I love you so much, but I have to go. We’ll talk again, okay?”

I nodded my head though I knew she couldn’t see me. “Thanks, Talia.”

“No. Thank you, Trista. You are saving me more than the other way around. You got that?”

“If you say so.”

“I do.”

The phone call ended and I stared at the screen until it blanked out.

At least I knew I would be leaving in two days.

I finally took “Up in the Air” off auto-repeat and pressed shuffle on my iPod. Trilogy’s “Buy Me a Little Happiness” started up with a killer guitar riff and with that, I lay down on my bed and allowed my eyes to

slowly close. Before I knew it, my Kindle was powered down in my lap and I had passed out in a deep sleep.



IF ANYONE ASKED me to describe the funeral where I watched four closed coffins buried side by side, I couldn't do it with any clear sense of what was happening.

All the bodies had been burned beyond recognition and therefore, although we were Catholic born and raised, there would be no open-caskets for any of the dearly departed.

Both MC clubs led the hearses

down Main Street along with the Pine Bluff police department. It was maudlin and depressing to say the least, especially since I rode in one of the limousines with my brother and Keri.

I don't even remember the dress I wore except it was black, long-sleeved and quite plain. My hair was pulled back into a chignon and my face didn't have anything on it other than a bit of cover-up and lip-gloss.

Trey held my hand the whole time and although his touch should have reassured me that everything would be all right, I didn't feel anything but numb. I knew what

those hands, so warm, reassuring and gentle with me could cause; the sheer amount of devastation they could reap with enough emotional pain and a nine millimeter within his grip. The pain had worked its way through my system and after crying so much, I thought my tear ducts would dry up, but there were always more from where they came from.

I'd been living a complete and utter lie.

I'd believed my parents would be safe. I'd believed I could make a normal life for myself the same way Tristan had done, but it wasn't true.

None of it was true. As long as I stayed in Pine Bluff, nothing would ever be normal or okay. The town had taken my family, ripped out my heart and destroyed my soul. I wanted nothing more to do with this tranquil piece of Hell any longer.

“I’m so sorry for your loss.”

I looked up into the kind eyes of Keri and smiled slightly, though it was half-assed and all I wanted was a stiff drink and a Xanax to make the world go away.

“Thanks, I appreciate that.”

I stood and walked over to the

table piled high with food. The reception was held at the Demon's Bastards clubhouse and I immediately grabbed a bottle of Macallan and poured a hefty amount into a red plastic cup.

"I'm sorry—"

"Yes, I know. Thank you. I have heard that phrase about a million times today. Please move on and fuck off," I snapped at the male voice, not bothering to turn around.

"Trista," the voice began, and I was turned around to face Clooney.

He was all in black and looked properly dressed in his suit. His

blond-streaked hair was slicked back against his head and his steel-gray eyes shone brilliantly. He certainly *seemed* full of contrition and guilt.

“Sorry, I didn’t realize...” I trailed off before I swigged from my drink.

“It doesn’t matter.” He nervously stuck his hands in his pants pockets. “What are you going to do now? Have you made any decisions about your future?”

I smiled, though there was nothing all that genuine about it. “Actually, the decisions have been made for me by *other* people, but it’s all good. I won’t be staying here. I

can't tell you where I am going either. Since we don't know who did what or why most of my family lost their lives, the Sheriff and my brother think my future location should be kept a secret and I'm inclined to agree with them at this point."

Clooney cocked his head to the side. "If the bodies were burned beyond recognition, how do they know it was your family who died?"

I pursed my lips and narrowed angry eyes. I glared at my ex like he was the biggest idiot in the world. "Hello? DNA tests. They don't become null and void just because a

body is badly burned.”

“Oh.” He suddenly grabbed me by the arm and led me outside. The weather was freezing, snow decorated the trees and the ground and the way the sky looked, there would be more before nightfall.

“I’m not supposed to be talking to you, remember?” I snapped with fury in my tone.

“Yeah, I get it. You’re pissed at me because I dumped you, but you were going to dump me anyway so what difference does it make? You were the first woman to possess my heart—do you think I would forget about that any time soon? I still love

you, Trista, but you deserve a life away from all of this. Look what's happened to your family and what's left of it. Regardless of where you go, I hope you are happy at least."

Although my body screamed in protest and my insides seemed to claw away at me to step away from him, I embraced him and didn't let go, not even when I began to sob, yet again.

"You'll be pleased to know I am going somewhere safe with bodyguards and I will be all right. You can bet on that." We separated reluctantly and I stared into his eyes. "We both know it wouldn't

have lasted, even if the original plan had worked out. You wouldn't have been able to deal with me at Stanford and when I planned to break up with you, it was best for the both of us. It was me trying not to be selfish and to allow you to live your life. We both know being part of this club is your life and who am I to take that away?

“When you patched in, you became a member for the rest of your life and I was never going to be an old lady, not even for you. I still have feelings for you and I love you but I was never *in* love, so it makes it that much easier to let go and move

on. The best decision I could have ever made was to let you go and I'm glad I did. Now you can be happy and find a woman who is *truly* meant for you."

Clooney laughed out loud then, downing the rest of his beer and flinging the bottle against the clubhouse, where it shattered and littered a blanket of white snow with fragments of green glass.

"That's bullshit and we both know it. You were the one for me and I will never find another woman like you. Me? Men like me? I'm a dime a dozen and once you get to where ever the hell it is you're

going, you'll find a guy and he is gonna treat you like your ass is made of gold and your pussy is fur-lined. Am I cool with that? Not in the slightest fucking sense, but what can I do? Not a goddamn thing without pissing off major members of the club. You're worth it, but not if you won't even try for us."

I swallowed the rest of the scotch in my plastic cup and threw it at him in sheer blind anger, though it bounced off without doing any damage. "What part about today is not registering in that pea brain of yours? I lost most of my fucking family and you want to talk about

our *failed* relationship? I don't give a shit if I ever find another man again because at the moment, it isn't really high on my list of priorities. My mother, my father, Tristan, and Taryn are gone, cold, buried in that frozen ground and there isn't a damn thing I can do about it."

I breathed in and out, my breath coming in layers of white air that dissipated quickly. "I would have given *anything* to be with them that night, because at least I wouldn't be alone. I could have died right along beside them and I would feel a sense of relief and peace, but all I am now is an empty, broken shell. I don't

exist anymore. Life to me is just getting up, taking a shower, putting on clothes and putting one foot in front of the other. We can't be together because I don't *have* anything left to *give* you or anyone else—*can't you understand that?*"

Clooney's mouth gaped open like a fish but at that moment, I didn't give a damn if I had hurt him or gone too far with what I said.

Without my family, he no longer meant anything to me.

In fact, as far as I was concerned, he might as well have been dead with them.



TREY DROVE ME to Reno-Taho International Airport.

We sat across from one another and I realized I didn't have much to say to him. To be honest, I didn't want to blame him because the police could find no evidence our parents' or brother's death had anything to do with the club, but a part of me still held him responsible.

What if he'd gone to Caltech? Would he still be a gangster and would he be in a motorcycle club? Probably not and then our family might have been whole and still alive. I hated the way I felt because

he was my only close family left, but I couldn't be around him at the moment. If Talia hadn't taken me in, I would have gone back to Connecticut with my aunt and uncle because I couldn't stand staying in Northern Nevada. I just wanted to leave this place and forget it ever existed in the first place.

"Trista, are you going to be all right?" Trey finally asked in a quiet voice.

I glared at him and I knew my eyes must have looked like daggers. "Are you fucking with me?"

He gripped my chin with strong, ring-covered fingers. "Stop using so

much foul language—it's unbecoming of your beautiful and unique personality. I know you're not going to be okay in *that* sense—neither will I. What I'm talking about, is staying with Talia and living in L.A. It's a complete one-eighty from this place.”

“No shit and it's definitely what I need right now. I'm not some country bumpkin, you know. I will be just fine in L.A. I would rather be with Talia than anyone else.”

Trey let go of my face and ran his hands through his hair. “She lives in the fast lane, Trista. She's in a rock band with a bunch of horny guys

who would like nothing more than to get their dirty hands on my hot, young virginal sister.”

I snickered at this point. “Isn’t that like the pot calling the kettle black? I made it through thirteen years of living here and being surrounded by three MCs and a brother who is a major player in one of them. L.A. should be a piece of cake.”

Trey shook his head before he reached over and embraced me. His lips kissed my forehead. “Call me when you arrive and whatever you do, don’t get sucked into it. Remember, it’s not real. Nothing

there is real and if you ever need a place to crash, you can always come back home.”

I felt the vomit rise in my throat at that statement and fought hard to keep down the BLT sandwich I'd eaten for lunch. “That won't happen. I won't ever come back, not to live here at least. This place is as dead to me as our parents and brother. I never want to reside here again.”

He sighed and got out of the car before he helped me with my bags. I'd only packed one carry-on and one piece to check in. It was a very small part of my wardrobe but I had no wish to wear most of the clothes

in my closet ever again. Some smelled like my mother and father, others reminded me of Tristan. And then there were the clothes I'd worn for Clooney and I would never wear them for another man ever again.

I grabbed my stuff. "Talk to you soon. Take care of yourself and promise me you won't go on a rampage. No matter how many people you kill or how much bloodshed you cause, it won't bring back our family."

Trey's hazel-green eyes were hard and dark. "Don't fuckin' tell me how to do my job, Trista. There will be revenge for our parents' death

and if you think I am just going to lay back and take it, you've got another think coming. I have murdered before and feel absolutely no qualms about what I have done. Whomever I kill because of what happened to our parents, won't cause me to miss one good night's worth of sleep. It comes with the job."

I nodded and attempted a smile as I walked inside the airport. I didn't even bother looking back. Trey was a survivor and he would be fine. It was my own fragile sanity I was worried about.

As I walked through the airport, I

felt more dead than alive. The whole process of checking in, receiving my ticket and walking through security all made me feel numb. I didn't begin to relax until I was safely on the plane and the captain informed us we had been given the clear to take off.

The moment the plane raced down the runway before it took flight and started its ascent into the air, I let out a breath I hadn't realized I'd been holding.

Pine Bluff was firmly behind me and there was only one way to go: forward.

Part Two
After
Two months later

Chapter Ten

LINX KNEW HE was running late to the studio.

After Cassidy realized there would be no reunion between them, she seemed to do crazy shit on purpose just to get under his skin. That day was a prime example.

Apparently, she was going back to Boston to visit her family and would be gone for two weeks. Brady

and Jimi were going with her, so either he saw his kids that morning, or he would miss seeing them for two weeks.

He'd already gone six whole months without seeing them during the tour and he cherished the time he spent with his boys.. They were old enough to know what their dad did for a living, but still young enough to easily forget him if he weren't careful. They were Irish twins, at the age of four and five, and he loved them both so much.

Linx only got two hours with them that morning before he laughingly convinced himself that

he could get to Culver City from Beverly Hills in a half hour. It had already been twenty-five minutes and he was still sitting in his pearl-cream Cadillac Escalade on the 405. The traffic was impossible and he'd be lucky if he was only thirty minutes late.

His phone began to ring and he picked it up, blue-tooth stuck firmly in his ear.

"I know, I'm fucking late and it's eating into our studio time," he greeted without waiting for Talia to say "Hello".

"Actually, you're fine. Some douchebag scheduled Trilogy before

us and they are taking forever. Can you believe it? We won't be ready to actually record for at least another hour, so take your time," she replied, her voice casual.

"Thanks. I really appreciate it. It's just...my kids will be gone for two weeks and I wanted to see them before they left—"

"Linx, I understand. You don't have to explain yourself to me."

She ended the call abruptly, but it wasn't out of rudeness.

If anyone understood, it would be her. She was working double time, re-recording the vocals on

their first two albums *and* working on their yet-to-be-released LP. He knew she had a lot on her plate; she was over four months pregnant and had taken in her teenage cousin due to the family tragedy that had happened while they'd been on tour.

That was one part of her life that Linx knew nothing about. This mystery cousin had yet to be introduced to any of the band and Talia was extreme in her protectiveness over her. They never went anywhere together without at least two bodyguards and although she was supposedly Talia's PA, she did her job efficiently and quietly

stayed in the background.

Linx wouldn't be a man if he couldn't admit how badly he wanted to meet this cousin of Talia's. If she looked half as beautiful and sexy as their lead singer, then he could understand why Talia kept her under lock and key. She might only be a teenager but she was eighteen—fucking legal—and from a small town. Her sexual experiences were probably limited to a fumbling high school boyfriend, if that, so she certainly wasn't like the skanks the guys attracted when they ventured out on a Friday night to any of L.A.'s hot spots like the Sky Bar or the

Viper Room.

He could feel his cock harden just imagining her and almost rear ended the beat-up Honda Civic in front of him.

Linx hadn't gotten laid since the pretty Japanese woman in Tokyo. As far as he was concerned, that was three months too long; however, with all the social diseases floating around, it was better to use his hand and know he was clean, than to mess around with every hot chick and sundry and end up with a nasty sexually transmitted disease. He'd been there, done that, early on in his career.

While he now he had a clean bill of health—during the early days of his career—he'd been quite the man-whore, careless about condom usage and nailing almost everything in a short skirt who came on to him. He'd suffered from crabs, Syphilis and Chlamydia, all before the age of twenty-one. He was lucky he'd been treated early and he thanked God he'd never passed a social disease on to anyone else. He was lucky he'd never come down with a nasty case of HPV. Luckily, he'd smartened up, too, and wasn't careless with his trysts.

Eventually, he made it to the

studio just in time to see Trilogy leaving as he parked his vehicle. Juli, the lead singer, looked pissed off as she lit a cigarette and talked to the other two members in hushed tones.

He locked his doors with his key fob and walked inside the studio used by all Introspect Records' artists. It was huge, state of the art, as it should be since the label was a major player in the music industry and musicians in every genre. On top of the rock division, Radioactive Records, there was also hip-hop division, known as Downtown Records; a country division, called Nash Records; and lastly, a pop

division, Uptown Records.

Linx stepped into the building and strolled directly to the studio area they always used.

His heart seemed to stop beating for a moment, before it began again in a slow, throbbing thud against his chest.

Talia spoke to a young woman who had a gorgeous, athletic body. She wasn't emaciated like most of the skanky, L.A. rock star-fucking chicks. She had a little meat on her bones and the jeans she wore hugged her ass like they were designed for her. She had on a white, short-sleeved blouse in that

peasant style, and a pair of three-inch, black closed-toed shoes—obviously designer, even to him—on her feet.

Her hair was long and dark, reaching past her shoulders with natural-looking chestnut highlights and the skin that was exposed was olive and clear, clean and beautiful. Not one tattoo marred all that perfection and all he could hope was when she turned his way, she would be butt ugly. “Good from far, but far from good” was a motto he and Niko shared as a secret inside joke.

Talia spotted Linx and ushered him over.

He couldn't believe he had the energy to stroll in their direction with the woody he was carrying in his pants. He adjusted himself on the way, and finally made it into their presence.

Her scent hit him first; it was a mixture of vanilla and freesia, completely captivating and extremely seductive. Sky blue eyes in the face of an angel met his and he was a goner, just like that.

She was fucking drop-dead beautiful and all this time, we have never met. This is a travesty of the first magnitude.

Her face barely had any make up;

all she wore was a light sprinkling of cover-up and red-tinted lip gloss on those full, beautiful lips.

“Sorry, Kris is also running late so I will make a quick introduction. Linx, this is my cousin and Trista, this is Linx. He plays bass for—”

“Yeah, I know,” she answered smartly. “Or did you forget I have been a fan of Winter’s Regret before they became an overnight sensation and the sudden change in the...uh... lead singers.”

Linx continued to stare at her though he knew it was rude, but she met his eyes easily and held out her right hand. Her nails were short, yet

manicured, and painted a deep purple that looked black against her skin.

His heart hammered in his body as he held out a tattooed covered arm and shook her hand. Her palm was baby-soft and he didn't want to end their contact, but when he finally tried to end their handshake, she held on with a steel grip and admired his ink.

“These aren't all of the tattoos you have, is it?”

“No, they're not,” he replied without any explanation.

“Didn't think so. Only difference

between bikers and rock stars is that the latter have legit jobs while the former are usually doing something illegal. Other than that, they are one and the same. Always looking for the next hot woman to fuck..." she trailed off.

"Trista, watch your goddamn mouth!" Talia exclaimed as her phone began to ring. She looked down and her perfectly shaped eyebrows furrowed. "I have to take this. Excuse me."

Suddenly they were alone and it seemed like they were the only two people in the room, regardless that there were other people roaming

around, including Niko.

“So, you’re the mysterious cousin Talia wouldn’t let us meet?” he finally inquired, for lack of anything more original coming to his muddled mind.

She finally let go of his hand and crossed her arms against her breasts. “Yeah. I don’t know why she is so protective over me. I’ve been around people who would murder for looking at them wrong. Rock stars are nothing. At least most of you get off on hurting yourselves more than anyone else.”

Linx was stunned by her lack of being star struck. She acted like he

was just another Joe-motherfucking-blow while he was a member of Winter's Regret for Christ's sake.

“What's that supposed to mean?”

“You know...the drugs, alcohol, random women and what not.” Trista glared directly into his eyes and though she tried to act nonchalant, he could see her clear as day.

There was a lot of pain there, but beneath that was also a spark of interest. He couldn't have been imagining it; he knew women well enough to know when they were attracted to him or when they found him repulsive. This one was very

intrigued but was good at hiding it.

“Take Niko...that blonde he’s with...they’ve known each other for less than a week. You can tell by their body language; he’s pretty sure she’s just a long-term fuck buddy, while her eager demeanor suggests she wants more, but she’ll take what she can get...for now.”

Linx felt bold and moved into her personal space. He could still taste the wintergreen gum that he’d been chewing before he came into the studio and promptly thrown away in the first available trash can. She didn’t step back like he expected her to; she held her ground. He was

taller than her and could feel her soft breasts against part of his upper stomach and it felt good.

“What about me?” he breathed, looking down at her.

“What about you?” Trista questioned as she arched one of her expertly-shaped eyebrows.

“When you look at me, what do you see?”

She cocked her head to the side, her face turned up towards his. “You were always my favorite member because I could read you like an open book. There was a time when you were really carefree and a bit

goofy. Those days are long gone.”

He felt his smirk disappear, though he schooled his facial expression so it only changed slightly. He instantly became much more guarded. “Is that it?”

“No. You’re a gorgeously fucked up guy. Whatever your ex-old lady did to you—well, she’s ruined you for anyone else. It’s up to you to put yourself back together because no one is going to do it for you. I highly doubt you get much out of sex anymore, other than the physical relief. The callouses on your hands and fingers tell me you use them for more than strumming your bass and

working out.”

This chick was fucking scary good at reading people and, despite her age, she was old beyond her years.

Is that your excuse for wanting to fuck her senseless?

Linx licked dry lips. “You’re extremely perceptive, Miss...?”

“Lennon.”

He laughed out loud, his humor completely lost on her before a small smile played on her full, luscious lips. “Lennon is my—”

“—first name, yeah, I know.” She leaned against the wall though he

could still feel her body heat. “It must be fate. We were meant to meet, have steamy sex and become tabloid fodder.”

Linx felt his eyes change from amused to acerbic. “Seems like we share the same twisted humor.”

“Something like that.” She took the opportunity to step under his outstretched arm and she was suddenly behind him.

He turned so fast, he almost gave himself whiplash. “I’m glad my life amuses you.”

“It doesn’t. I’m just as fucked up as you are. Two broken souls in a

world filled with misery and disappointment—there's *nothing* 'fateful' about that." She hoisted her blue leather bag on her right arm. "Talía is hosting a small party tonight. Band members and significant others only, Winter's Regret and Scarlet Fever. You should drop by. Perhaps you might have fun."

"Will you be there?" he blurted, promptly cursing himself inwardly for acting too eager to see her again.

He was acting like a little high school, bitch boy. What the fuck was wrong with him?

Trista smiled, showing a perfect

set of straight, white teeth. “Well, since I live there, yes, I’ll be around. We can play this game again, except it will be called ‘Deconstructing Trista’. It will be interesting to hear your answers.”

Before he could respond, she turned, walked over to Talia, said something to her then left the studio.

Linx let out a strangled breath he had no idea he’d been holding.

Moments later, Seth and Kris walked in, chatting, and he knew it would take all his energy and concentration not to mess up. He couldn’t wait to see her that night

and his attitude both depressed him and exhilarated him.

“You’d better watch yourself with that one.”

Linx turned to see Niko, who was free of the blonde who’d been hanging on to him moments earlier.

He allowed his right hand to wander through his silky brown hair. “What are you talking about? She can actually hold a conversation. Are you saying I can’t talk to an attractive woman without sex getting in the way?”

“No, that isn’t what I meant. Trista isn’t just any chick.” Niko

faced him with bright green eyes resembling rare, Colombian emeralds. “She’s Talia’s fucking cousin. That means no one night stands and no fuck buddy situations. Besides, she’s eighteen and just went through a tough time. It’s pretty fucked up, if you ask me.”

Linx breathed deeply. “You have my word, brother, I won’t touch her.”

Niko slapped a hand across his back harder than necessary. “Good. Keep your thoughts off her ass and your hands off her pussy. You just might live to see old age.”

He laughed though he’d found

nothing his best friend had said funny.

Logic didn't always rule in life and though he knew he should listen to his friend's good advice, he couldn't trust himself to follow through.

Chapter Eleven

I HAD TO get out of that studio, the sooner the better.

All that time I'd spent at the clubhouse with Trey, in the company of men —coupled with having two brothers and not many women I'd ever considered real friends—were definitely excellent skills to possess in my current situation. Sexy, tattooed men didn't

make me weak kneed and girly.

Not even famous ones like Linx Carter, who'd always been my favorite member of Winter's Regret. I loved his hair, his neatly trimmed facial hair, his style, which I considered to be emo-casual, complete with black eyeliner and matching nail polish; I loved his hard, lean tattooed body, which was a myriad of different designs. Today, he'd gone au natural and didn't have on a shred of makeup, his nails were polish free, and his hair was its natural light-brown color.

I knew about every one of his tats, and to have met him in the

flesh was beyond surreal, but he'd never know it because I masked my feelings very well.

Talia had left it up to me to call the caterers and make sure the party was arranged perfectly and ready in time for all her friends. I had to admit it was going to be awesome to meet the members of Scarlet Fever, just because I loved their music as much as Winter's Regret.

Of course, as great as it had been to hang out and live with Talia, more often than not, I felt like a fraud.

Most people gave grieving family members, or friends, a certain

amount of time to feel sorry for themselves before they told them to snap the fuck out of it, and what was left of my family was no different.

For the first month after I'd arrived, I'd moped around Talia's house, hardly bothering to bathe or eat. I probably smelled like a slaughter house but I couldn't give a shit. I ate Xanax like they were candy and drank a lot.

Then after eight weeks, I realized I couldn't continue to hurt myself. I took a shower and put on my favorite pair of jean shorts only they didn't fit, they were too big. Talia had a state of the art gym and

swimming pool that I'd used often when the pain became too much. It turned out that I had swam and done the elliptical enough to work myself down to a size six.

I went crazy and ordered ten pairs of jeans from Victoria's Secret, countless bra and panty sets, plus new t-shirts and cute tops. The weather in L.A. was constantly sunny and although it was winter, I didn't consider temps in the sixties to be cold.

Talia had left me the keys to a hybrid she'd recently bought; a brand new, silver Ford Edge that quickly became my vehicle of

choice. She texted me from tour to let me know it was mine and all the necessary paperwork for registration could be found in the glove compartment. I drove all the way to Vegas one weekend, just to get the windows tinted limo-black. I also registered the SUV in Nevada, using my home address in Pine Bluff.

If my life *was* in any real danger, the vehicle wouldn't serve a purpose as a way to find me. Registering it in Nevada kept the trail cold, since I no longer resided there.

Talia thought I was crazy for doing such a thing, but once I explained to her that with Nevada

plates, if, and when, I was stopped by the cops for having windows tinted black, they couldn't do shit. It wasn't exactly illegal and was frankly, overlooked, in Nevada to have dark, tinted windows. I didn't bother to tell her the real reason why I'd registered the vehicle there because I didn't want to worry her about me.

When she came back from tour, tired and almost fourteen weeks pregnant, I spent time with her and helped her as much as I could. Her situation was difficult, to put it lightly. Her long-time boyfriend, Seth Delvecchio, and the former

lead singer of Winter's Regret, wasn't the father of the child. When I'd asked, she wouldn't tell me who the baby belonged to either.

I soon figured it out when Jaden Cox, a member of the Lucifer's Saints MC and Scarlet Fever, kept showing up to see her. They tried to act casual in my presence, but I knew feelings when I saw them and it was obvious these two were crazy about each other.. He was obviously the one who'd knocked her up.

Talia didn't want to talk about the tour or what happened, but she was more than willing to lend an ear when it came to my problems, of

which I had few.

My only nagging issue was a man: Clooney.

He called and texted me non-stop. How he managed to get my new unlisted number was beyond me. Trey swore up and down he hadn't given it to him; Clooney's obsessive behavior bothered me more than my life potentially being in danger. I ignored him because I didn't want to think about my life in Pine Bluff. He was a part of my past and I was determined for him to stay that way too.

After I left the studio, the first place I stopped was Costco, where I

loaded up a huge double-wide shopping cart full of alcohol. Various imported packs of beer followed by the hard stuff with decent labels: tequila, gin, cognac, vodka and rum, both amber-colored and clear.

I had perfected the art of multi-tasking and called the catering service. I told them what time they needed to be there, what kind of appetizers to bring, and how many people we would need in terms of staff.

I stood in line at the check-out when my phone rang. Talia had upgraded it as well, and now I carried around a Galaxy Note 4 by

Samsung. It was great for making appointments and it had all the latest technology. I should have checked the caller ID, but my mind was so preoccupied, I answered it with a breathless, "Hello."

I knew I sounded winded, but hauling all that booze in the cart and pushing it down the long, endless halls of the discount store hadn't been easy. It weighed a ton, but I always up for a challenge.

"I didn't actually think this was your real number, so I had to call to make sure."

The voice was familiar, deep and a bit husky, but sexy as hell. "Linx?"

Is that you?"

"Who else were you expecting?" the rocker questioned, though there was absolutely zero arrogance in his tone.

"Not *you*, that's for sure." I surely wasn't going to tell him about the issues with my ex, so I side-stepped that problem with, "How the hell did you get my number? Talia said it was unlisted. I mean, I know that means nothing. My brother is a genius and he had my new phone number a couple days after Talia bought the phone for me."

Linx sighed on the other end. "Sorry...I have a bad habit of

‘acquiring’ information about people I find interesting. Your pregnant cousin reluctantly gave me your number when I told her you’d taken something of mine by accident and I needed it back *now* . She wasn’t pleased with my interest in you but she gave me the information anyway.”

Shit! This wasn’t good.

Talia could smell attraction and would know the tension between us wasn’t just because he was famous, while I was a nobody, who happened to be her cousin. I could definitely fight it and wanted to, because my life was a living

nightmare at the moment. According to Talia, the extra security was for my precaution. I even had security on me at Costco. All I knew about them was that they drove an inconspicuous looking black Mini Cooper and resembled surfers though both men were ex-military—Navy SEALs. They kept their distance but were always around, even when I didn't think they were.

“Listen, I don't think it was smart of you to ask Talia for my number. She knows the way I feel about you and she might be worried that something might develop between

us,” I said in a quiet voice.

“She thinks you stole one of my favorite picks.”

My eyebrows shot up as I handed the cashier my Costco American Express to pay for the alcohol. “Um, what?”

“You know what a guitar is, right?”

“Duh,” I replied, with a hint of snark to my voice.

“And you realize that we guitarists, whether we play acoustic, electric or bass, use picks? They are those little pieces of plastic that help us reach those highs and lows when

we play. In my case, it's just lows, since I'm the bassist for the group," Linx explained yet again, in a manner that was not in the least condescending.

"So, you lied and claimed I stole a pick? Can't those be easily replaced?"

"Yes, they can, but like any instrument that makes you better when you play, faves are developed. The pick you nicked happened to be one of my favorites."

"And you're trying to convince me an object like that, which can be so easily replaced, convinced my cousin to give you my number? I'm

calling bullshit here. Talia has *never* been that trusting, not even before our aunt married Mr. Richie Rich. Have you forgotten she spent ten years in South Boston too? You can't bullshit a bullshitter."

The cashier gave me my card back after the purchase went through and handed me my receipt. I stuck the card in my purse and kept the receipt in my hand while I waited for Mr. Liar to come clean.

Linx sighed as I slipped on my Bluetooth, threw my phone in my oversized handbag and handed the male employee standing at the exit my receipt. It took forever for the

employee to go through my long list of alcohol beverages.

“Promise you won’t be mad?” he finally said on the other end.

“Depends. I don’t exactly have time in my life for stalkers, Linx.”

“Well, at the moment, I’m working crazy insane hours at the studio, and go home so exhausted, I usually have a beer, smoke a joint and go straight to bed. I don’t exactly have time to stalk *anyone*, Trista,” he snapped back.

As soon as I was cleared by the receipt checker and free to push my heavy cart of alcohol out of the

warehouse, I responded, albeit reluctantly, “I won’t get mad. It’s just I already have a crazy, psycho ex, who is a full charter member of the Bastards—sponsored by my brother, mind you—texting and blowing up my phone constantly. I can’t figure out he got my new number in the first place. I don’t want you to start doing it too. I’ll let you in on a little secret about me, Linx: there is *nothing* special about me. Zip, zero, zilch. Nada, not a goddamn thing.

“I’m an eighteen year old woman with a world of problems. My only claim to fame is a famous cousin who can make miracles happen in

the studio, on stage and in her personal life too. I am not even old enough to drink, but I just walked out of Costco with enough booze to pass out a whole party full of revelers. Talia knows the right people who made a fake California ID for me that looks and feels real.”

He laughed on the other end and it was infectious; I smiled though he couldn't see it. “You might not *think* you're special, but everyone has their worth, Trista, including you. I don't know why I asked Talia for your number. She gave it to me albeit reluctantly. I assured her my intentions were not pervy and I

truly wanted to get to know you. I feel like a dirty old man sniffing up behind you, but I'd like to be your friend...if you would let me."

My mind focused on what was not being said, and there was so much emotion and heartbreak in his tone, I was close to crying. Vulnerable and naked before me, after a devastating marriage, he merely wanted friendship and there was nothing wrong with that. His marriage had been finalized over a year ago and his grieving should have stopped, the healing commenced, and seriously, he should have been ready to move the

fuck on.

If I could harden my heart to the death of family members only a couple months' previously, though the pain was so fresh I couldn't even say their names without crying, he should have been able to get over whatever kind of mind fuck Cassidy had obviously performed on him.

"Hey, are you still there?" His deep voice and sexy Boston accent jolted me out of my contemplative episode.

"Yeah, just loading up the alcohol for tonight," I replied, before I stopped what I was doing and leaned against the side of my car,

the hatchback trunk fully opened. “Yes, we can do the ‘friend’ thing. I don’t have many people I know in L.A. so the more the merrier.”

“Good.” I could hear the relief in his strong, masculine voice. “See you tonight then.”

I ended the call and began to struggle with heavy boxes as I slowly loaded them into the car.

“Do you need some help with that, ma’am?”

My hackles went up completely, as ice coursed through my veins and my heart skipped a beat. I knew the voice all too well; I hadn’t grown up

in Northern Nevada without a run in with *all* the motorcycle gangs in the area.

Brooklyn Decker.

Sergeant at Arms.

Member of the White Knights MC.

He was one of the worst; he climbed the ranks so quickly because his uncle was the president of the club. It also helped that he'd murdered the man who'd previously held his position because he was tired of waiting for the COPD and emphysema to kick in bad enough for one of the founding fathers' of

the club to die. He and Tristan had also gone to school together.

What the fuck was he doing in L.A.? They didn't even run the meth trade down here, not through the charter club. Their Southern California division handled it.

I reached into my purse inconspicuously and grabbed a can of Mace, just in case, as I turned to face him.

“What are you doing here, Decker? Stalking me?”

His head was shaved, but he wore a skull cap to cover up the swastika tattoo he had there.. His

icy-blue eyes glared into mine. "Don't flatter yourself, Trista. I'm just about to head in to get some booze for a party tonight."

Where the hell were my bodyguards when I needed them?

I crossed my arms against my chest defensively and glared at him. "What do you want and why are you even talking to me?"

"Call your brother off. Tell him to stop killing members of our club, because we had nothing to do with your parents' and brother's death," Decker responded, as he leaned toward me, yet not close enough to cause a scene.

“You know as well as I do that no one can *control* Trey—he isn’t going to listen to me. That’s club business and even I can’t interfere with that—you know that. I can’t do shit about his activities, especially when I am in a different state!” I hissed in anger.

Decker’s eyes were lifeless, soulless, and not even one ounce of pity crept into his harsh, smoker’s voice. “Yeah, but you *can* talk to Jonesy. He’s always had a soft spot for you and he’ll call his top *dog* off. Either that, or ask him if he wants to bury another family member... specifically his baby sister?”

I knew better than to think any threat from a White Knight, specifically their Sergeant at Arms, was anything other than real and a true danger.

My breath came in short bursts as I started getting close to having a full blown anxiety attack. "I'll see what I can do."

He leaned in closer to me and I could smell his foul, unwashed body odor and at least a couple of days' worth of sweat, alcohol and cigarette smoke leaking from his pores, to cause a nauseating combination that made me want to puke. "You do that."

“Is there anything wrong, Ms. Lennon?”

It was Marco, my lead body guard. Jared, the other one, pretended to be fiddling with stations in the Mini parked next to my SUV.

“I assure you, nothing is wrong.” Decker smiled, displaying off-white teeth, stained from years of tobacco usage and foul breath—a deadly combination when I already felt light-headed and overwhelmed by his proximity to me. “Ms. Lennon and I are old friends.”

“If you could please escort this gentleman out of my presence,

Marco, I would be most grateful.” My voice didn’t sound like mine but I managed the sentence without hesitation or a stutter.

“Certainly, Ms. Lennon.” Marco moved in fast, grabbing Decker’s arm and hauled him away.

I breathed a sigh of relief as Jared stepped out of the Mini and loaded the rest of the cart into my vehicle for me.

He whistled. “I knew guys in the SEALs like that fucking asshole. They were all ice—complete and utter sociopaths, who just liked to get their gun off and blow shit up. They passed all the psych tests

because they were just hard-wired that way. Human life was cheap and they couldn't be bothered to give a damn."

"Yeah?" I looked at Jared and smiled. "I've been around men like Decker my whole life and nothing ever changes. Apparently, I can't escape my demons by leaving home."

"No, you can't, but that doesn't mean you should worry about it. That's why your cousin hired us. We might be *former* SEALs but we haven't lost our skills or our training. That man will never step within one hundred yards of you

ever again—not on our watch.”

Jared finished loading up my vehicle and closed the trunk before he winked at me. He shot me a friendly smile, and hopped back into the Mini as Marco strolled over to me.

“Are you sure you’re okay? I will have to report his threat to Talia because she insisted she stay involved and up to date—”

“Please, don’t,” I interrupted, shaking my head. “She’s pregnant and she doesn’t need to be burdened with my problems. Decker doesn’t want me anyway. He’s pissed at my brother and to be honest, that’s

none of my business. Trey can handle himself, he has a whole MC behind him and he's Sergeant at Arms for the Bastards' charter club as well."

Marco shook his head, his penetrating brown eyes glaring into my own. "I won't say anything this time, but if anything else like this happens, she will know everything that went down. You got me?"

I nodded, vigorously, before I walked over and hopped into my SUV.

I thought I would be okay, but my hands shook, and I knew the whole incident had affected me

more than I wanted to let my guards know. The demons from my past were haunting my present.



BY THE TIME the party was in full swing, I'd taken a Xanax, enjoyed a long, hot shower, and changed into a pretty black and cream lace dress, which skimmed my curves and ended right above the knee. Paired with four-inch Chanel Mary Jane heels, I thought I looked sweet yet accessible.

My makeup was minimal, but I made a bit more effort. My eyes were dark and smoky and the dark

red lip gloss gave my lips a shine, without overpowering the carefully applied, eye enhancing makeup.

Suffice to say, I could tell that Linx was impressed with my work when he stepped into the party and our eyes locked.

He looked casual in dark blue jeans that were slightly baggy, a black wife beater, and matching Doc Martens with black laces.

Docs always held good and bad memories for me. They were kick ass shit kickers, sturdy comfortable boots, but the White Knights sullied them for me. They wore them with white laces as an indication that

they were neo-Nazi skinheads who'd managed to get their shit together long enough to form an MC.

Sometimes I wished I could give myself a lobotomy just so I wouldn't compare every little thing in my new life to the old one. That was how I viewed my life with Talia, my 'new life'. She was so full of spirit and had so much life in her, it was easy to forget I couldn't call my parents to let them know I was having a blast in L.A. or Tristan to tell him that the City of Angels wasn't all bad and there were real, genuine people here too, who could

see past all the fakeness and glitz.

I grabbed a champagne cocktail from one of the passing waiters, who balanced drinks on a tray perfectly, as he strolled through the party. It was such an amazing sight to see so many famous people and was I completely suffering from information overload. I thought I would have gotten used to it by now, but I wasn't and probably never would be. This wasn't my life; I was simply borrowing pieces of Talia's and felt like a complete and utter imposter.

I walked outside to the pool area and examined the perfectly square-

shaped pool, with its deep blue tiles that made the water appear a dark royal blue. I sipped my cocktail and sat down on one of the comfortable loungers. This was the perfect place to observe the party without having to participate, I thought dreamily, until a waft of cigarette smoke drifted my way. I turned to see Linx.

He was only about twenty feet away, but he might as well have been a mile from me as far as I was concerned. He was talking on the phone and, from his tone, he wasn't happy as he paced the length of the pool. I watched as he turned and our eyes met.

His blue eyes penetrated mine with such intensity, it felt like time had stopped; I looked away though I could still feel his gaze. It bore through me and I suddenly felt like I was suffering from heart palpitations, its beat so fierce in my chest. I felt my breasts heave up and down as if they were trying to escape the thin, lace material of my dress. With some effort I finally managed to look away to study the party again.

Talia and Sydney, the heir to a Norwegian shipping empire, stood together. Their talk was animated and they both held tall crystal

glasses of sparkling San Pellegrino since they were both preggers. I'd met Sydney and, like everyone else, knew she and Kasper Gillian, rock God and the lead singer of Scarlet's Regret, were engaged. She was glowing and patted Talia's growing bump. My cousin was four months along but still, her stomach was small, though slightly rounded.

I smiled because Talia seemed happy, despite her overly complicated love life. I envied her: she was living her dream and that must have been mind-blowing. How would it feel for me to live out my dream? It wasn't overly complicated

or artistic but I still wanted to pursue it when, and if, I finally came to terms with what my life had been for the past couple of months.

“Were you listening to my conversation?” Linx’s voice inquired and immediately interrupted my contemplation.

“No, I haven’t a clue who you were talking to,” I replied, as he sat next to me, and slid his phone beside him on the lounge. .

“Oh yeah...sometimes I forget you aren’t just another star-fuck looking for her next victim on the horizon. I’ll be right back. Don’t move.” He walked back into the

house, grabbed a Beck's from one of the passing waiters before he quickly returned. It was demolished within three deep swallows. "What are you doing out here by yourself?"

I snickered before I sipped from my drink. "I know you find this hard to believe, but I have attended more than enough parties to last me a lifetime. The crowd may be different here, but the outcome is the same. Just a lot of drunk people talking about nothing in particular."

Linx stared at me for far too long and I found myself feeling slightly uncomfortable. My face became a matching crimson color to prove it.

He was so *not* Clooney.

He was a rock star and a famous one at that. Though bassists weren't usually considered sex symbols, he had way too many fan pages. He was hot and sexy and could have any woman in the world, so why was he wasting his time chatting with me?

"Don't let me stop you from getting back inside to mingle with your friends." I finally looked in his direction and those fucking blue eyes stared into mine, searing the edges of my tattered, torn and nearly destroyed soul.

"Actually, I was going to ask you if you wanted to get out of here and

go for a drive? It wouldn't be very long one because I live about a mile from here, but we could head up to Mulholland Drive."

"Been there, done that." I paused to finish the rest of my drink. "Your house sounds promising, though. You smoke bud? I could really do with having an out of body experience at the moment."

Linx raised inquisitive eyebrows. "You look too innocent to indulge in Chronic." Reaching out, the fingers of his left hand lightly traced my jaw, a hint of seduction behind the movement. "You look so clean and unused. I will have to watch myself

around you. Talia would murder me if I deflowered her virginal cousin.”

It was my turn to laugh, shaking my head. “Jeez, she really does paint me as a nun. That isn’t me at all, just so you know.” I looked away from him before I stared into those endless pools of blue again. “You wanna impress me? Get me into a hot club here that’s for the twenty-one and over crowd. I’ve already told you that I have a fake ID, so no worries, but I want to see if they’ll card me at all if I am with you.”

He breathed deeply as he leaned in close, his voice soft next to my ear. “That’s dangerous. What if the

paparazzi catch us? They'll definitely take our picture and claim we're a couple. I am not ready to get my balls sliced off...yet, by Talia for fucking with her young, impressionable cousin."

I laughed out loud at this statement. "Young, yes. Impressionable? Um, no. Ever seen that movie, *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me*?"

"Of course. I might be in a mainstream rock band, but I have always been the avant-garde member. I think David Lynch is a fucking genius and have watched all of his movies at least ten times. I

own the whole *Twin Peaks* series. What's your point?" He questioned, as he moved closer to me; I could smell the enticing scent of his cologne, a mixture of amber, sage and lavender.

Our legs were pressed against one another, from hip to knee and it was distracting. "Well, Lynch isn't wrong about small towns. Pine Bluff is a lot like Twin Peaks, except my father never raped me and I wasn't a secret coke head. I did date a bad ass biker prospect my brother sponsored after Clooney came back from Afghanistan, and I am *not* a virgin. I'm not promiscuous and

have only been with one man, but I know what sex is all about and have seen some of the most depraved acts you can imagine.”

“Well, okay then. Let’s get you to that club,” Linx stood and held out his hands, which I grabbed.

He pulled me up easily and in the rush of gravity and sheer weight, I was suddenly crushed against his chest. My breasts perked at the lean, hardness that was his body. I didn’t know how long this whole “flirtation” scene could go on between us, but I didn’t care.

For the first time in a long time, I was actually having fun and I

wanted to be alone with him, no matter how dangerous it was to me or my heart.

Chapter Twelve

LINX DROVE DOWN the street in his Escalade while Trista sang along to will.i.am's "#thatPOWER". She was really good when it came to the Justin Bieber parts, and mocked his voice perfectly.

"Ever thought about being a back-up singer?" he asked, as he stole a glance of her while doing his best to concentrate on the road.

“I can’t sing to save my life, but I like will.i.am’s album, *#willpower*. I listen to all types of music including all that old rock shit. Jonesy liked U2 and Coldplay but he was mostly old school: Led Zeppelin, Pink Floyd, Jimi Hendrix—bands from his faraway youth. I can appreciate the hardness of Winter’s Regret and Scarlet Fever just as I can the softness of Mariah Carey and Robin Thicke. My iPod is so full of different artists, I probably seem schizophrenic. I have everything from Sarah McLachlan and Mylène Farmer to Kanye West and Jay-Z. I don’t discriminate where music is

concerned,” she explained, as he turned the volume down.

Her voice was so soft, yet feminine; he liked listening to her talk.

“Well, you have good taste. As long as you don’t mention Demi Lovato or Taylor Swift, we’re cool.”

She turned toward him and he could feel her gorgeous eyes on his profile. “I never said I didn’t have those artists on my iPod. You *assumed* I’m too cool for school. I love ‘Heart Attack’..it is such a cool song about a young woman who doesn’t want to fall in love and ‘I Knew You Were Trouble’ is one of

my favorite songs. I listened to *Red* almost non-stop after Clooney and I broke up.”

“I forgot...you’re young...some of your music tastes—”

“What about my music tastes? If I had a theme song for you, it would be...‘Up In The Air’ by Thirty Seconds to Mars. What would be your theme song for me?”

They were stopped at a red light and he looked over at her. His theme song for her suddenly came on the radio and she arched one of her perfect eyebrows.

“This song...‘Locked Out Of

Heaven' by Bruno Mars."

Trista laughed out loud. "You don't know me, Linx. There is no way in hell you feel anything for me, except maybe a throb in your dick to get me into your bed and that's cool. It won't happen tonight, by the way, but I am not big on the word, 'never'."

"Do you want to go back to my place?" he questioned, unable to stop the words from tumbling out his mouth. "I mean just to talk. I won't touch you in any inappropriate way what-so-ever, I promise."

"I thought you would never ask.

Sure, let's go."

He breathed a sigh of relief because for just a moment, he thought she might have demanded he take her back to her cousin's house.



TRISTA ASKED FOR a full tour of his house. He obliged, showing her around while she held a Heineken and closely walked side by side with him.

What made her so different from all the other women he'd been with?

Well, for one, she didn't find him intimidating in any way and she

wasn't desperate. She was very comfortable around men and didn't seem the least bit nervous to be alone with him.

Linx knew he should have left the situation alone but he had to ask. "Why aren't you worried about being in my presence without your bodyguards?"

They stopped in front of the ugly fucking Picasso painting that his interior designer had picked up at auction. He had been convinced when the designer had told him that it would be worth a mint when he decided to sell it. Personally, he would have preferred a Jackson

Pollack to this fugly painting taking up prime real estate in his caramel painted hallways.

“Are you asking me if I know how to defend myself?” Trista inquired, swigging from her bottle of Heineken.

“Well, yes.”

Trista walked up to him and spread her legs slightly. He could feel his back pressing against the wall. The painting next to his head seemed irrelevant as she pulled a small, black gun out of her bag.

“I grew up in the country, sweetie, everyone learns how to

shoot. Thanks to my brother, I have a variety of protection, most with the serial numbers filed off, but this one is registered...and before you ask, yes, I have a gun license.”

“Is the safety on?”

“Of course. You don’t carry unless you could actually go through with it, pull the trigger, and actually murder a human being. I don’t take carrying this lightly, and I know all about guns and gun safety. This is a Walther P22, similar to James Bond’s gun, but it’s not the same model. Don’t worry, I won’t use it, you’re not a threat.”

Trista backed up from him and

replaced the gun in her handbag.

“How do you know that?” Linx wondered, guiding her back toward his sitting room.

She looked back at him before turning her head to stare straight ahead. “I have been around enough and seen enough to know you’re one of the good guys. Yeah, I think you wanna get laid, but I know you wouldn’t force yourself on me. That’s all I care about and I feel... safe with you. Everybody has a sixth sense...the key is to listen to it and you’ll keep yourself out of a lot of crappy situations. I *live* by mine.”

Linx smiled as they sat on his

comfortable, midnight blue leather wraparound sofa. Its color went perfectly with the gunmetal gray painted walls.

He picked up the remote and switched on his sound system. "Lost Without U" began to play and a small smile appeared on Trista's face. She kicked off her shoes and lay back on the sofa, her head settled against the arm rest.

"So, the million dollar question is, why don't you have a girlfriend? You're sexy, young and in one of the biggest rock bands out at the moment who don't suck. Are you really picky or just hard to please?"

That certainly wasn't a question Linx had imagined he'd be answering, but he decided to take a stab at a decent answer. Finishing his Heineken, he answered, "Bad marriage. I have two kids and an ex that sucks money from me like I am made of it. I guess the whole situation rattled my cage a bit...I guess you could say I'm both wary and gun shy now. Not to mention that I live in one of the fakest cities in the world. Women don't want Lennon Carter, they want Linx, band member and bassist for Winter's Regret. They want the brooding rock star with a tat

covered body and a cock that can fuck all night. Just like women don't want to be reduced to just their tits and pussies, men don't want to be reduced to the size of their cock and wallet."

"You don't seem so brooding now. I never really picked that up from you, but you definitely are damaged goods. Your wife did a number on you, all right." Trista sat up and finished her Heineken before he took the bottles, stood and strolled into his oversized kitchen. He dumped them into the recycle bin and grabbed two more.

Linx closed the refrigerator door

and was face to face with Trista. He'd never heard her enter the kitchen.

“Sorry. I didn’t scare you, did I?”

“No,” he replied, his voice deep and a mixture of honey, whiskey and sexual undertones. “So, why don’t you have a boyfriend?”

She laughed and it was light and almost musical. “Well, let’s see. I’m fucked up because of my parents and brother. You see, they recently began their dirt naps—along with the young woman who would have been my future sister-in-law—at the Pine Bluff Cemetery. Then, there’s Trey. He’s my overprotective,

gangster older brother who is part of an MC and has an issue with his sister being a woman, instead of a child. I escaped him, but now I am stuck with my ultra-famous older cousin who also still thinks of me as little girl. Makes it kind of tough to actually have a real life—know what I mean?”

His gaze narrowed at her as he warred with the desire to pull her to him “But you’re eighteen and have the whole world ahead of you. You have plenty of time to get serious with someone. Your only goal in life right now should be to have fun.”

Trista stared at him, her sky blue

eyes bright. "I'm down with that." She moved closer until they were merely inches apart. "I wanna see the tats on your chest."

Linx laughed, though he wasn't nearly as confident as he sounded. He pulled off his wife-beater with nervous and shaky hands.

His chest was covered by a series of roses, with a gun displayed on each side.

"Were they your favorite band growing up?" she asked, as her fingertip softly traced the design in his skin.

"No...I was much more into hip-

hop as a kid. Rock may have been the way out of the 'hood, but I have a diverse taste in music too. 2Pac, Eminem and Dr. Dre were more my scene back then. The tattoo represents South Boston, the part of the city that I called home for eighteen years. It's got this beauty, hence the roses, but it's also marred in crime and violence, so the guns. I got away from all that shit but this tat reminds me of how different my life could have been if I'd stayed," he explained, opening the Heinekens and handing one to her.

His throat felt itchy and dry; he'd practically demolished his bottle

while she was just getting started on hers.

“I know Boston quite well. My dad was born and raised there, second generation. His family is from Northern Ireland. My mom moved to Boston with her family as a child, but they were upper-middle class so she never saw the rougher areas of the city. She and my aunt were quite sheltered...I guess it was a surprise when Talia's mother married someone from the wrong side of the tracks, so to speak.

“Anyway, Mom and Dad met at a MIT university party although she attended BU. They were an instant

match made in heaven. My grandparents were happy with my mother's choice of partner, and suffice to say and they approved of the marriage. Trey, Tristan and I were all born there in Boston, but we moved to Pine Bluff when I was young. I don't remember much about my childhood there."

Linx didn't know what to say to that, his mind wandering back to his young days in Southie. A long silence ensued, and he shook his head. Time to change the subject.

He certainly had no intention of telling her about his childhood or his parents' courtship. It seemed so

ordinary in comparison to the life he lived now and he cherished those memories. It was the only part of his life that he felt he owned and kept him grounded. It also reminded him that none of the “fame shit” was real.

He clapped his hands together after he set his beer on the kitchen counter. “So, Beautiful...what kind of fun were you thinking of having?”

Trista smiled devilishly. He knew she was going to say something that would get her, or him, into trouble, yet he still found her fun and interesting and way too attractive at the same time. “I want to get a

tattoo, but if I get one then you have to get one too.”

“That means calling out Loire at this time of the night, but to hell with it. I’ll tip like a Rockefeller.”

“I was afraid you would say something cheesy like that.”

Linx winked as she burst out laughing. Instinctively, he knew it would also be a very long night.



LOIRE SHOWED UP an hour late with her tattoo kit and asked what Linx wanted. He wanted something easy and not very complex. In the end, he chose his nickname with a

barbed wire design surrounding it. He wanted the tattoo on his left forearm, and held his palm upward so she could disinfect the area before she got started.

As she did the work with her usual accurateness and delicacy, Loire inquired, "What about you, little girl? Do you know what you want or do you want to peruse my catalogue?"

"No, I know what I want," Trista spoke up confidently. "I want ivy columns, horizontally placed, starting at my shoulder blades. I also want you to write 'In Memoriam' and these names." She held up the

small paper she had been writing on to show her.

“Large or small? How much of your back do you want this to cover?”

“I want the ivy column to end at my lower back, basically where a tramp stamp would be, but I want it to cover my whole back.”

“Any color or just black ink?”

“Black and gray ink only.”

“You sound like you know a lot about tattoos,” Loire responded as she blotted at the excess ink before continuing Linx’s design.

“I do. I know a lot about you too,”

Trista said, her tone matter of fact. “Do you remember me? You and my brother, Trey, dated on and off in high school before your asshole Dad ran you out of town after graduation. Instead of setting up a tattoo shop in Northern Nevada, you fled here.”

Loire abruptly stopped what she was doing and almost lost her grip on her tattoo gun. “Yeah, I know who you are. How is Trey, by the way?”

“Dating your best friend.”

Her eyebrows arched, though she kept her eyes on her work. “*That* slut? I heard she was doing porn

now.”

“She does, and she was quite happy to see you leave. I don’t know how serious they are but I find it hard to believe that my brother would marry a porn star. I think it is a laziness factor more than anything. She’s convenient and he doesn’t feel like looking for another woman. The fact that she also has sex with other women for money... well, perhaps he doesn’t mind as much. I couldn’t really tell you.”

Loire merely snickered to herself. “Trey was something else. I absolutely fell in love with the man but...when we ended our

relationship, he broke a part of me that no man has ever been able to fix. That doesn't stop him from getting on his Harley and driving all the way down here for his tats, though. Every one on his body, I did personally."

Linx listened to the women's conversation, ignoring the slight pain as Loire finished up. He looked down at her handy work, confused as to why she'd included an ampersand above his name, leaving enough space for someone's name.

"You're going to want that filled in one day, trust me. The way I did it will make it easier for me to finish

it, when the time comes.”

He shrugged nonchalantly and mumbled, “Fat chance.”

Loire bandaged his tat and he stood, freezing to watch as Trista removed her dress. She wore a pair of black lacey panties and a bra, but it wasn't much different from seeing her in a bikini. When she undid her bra and let it fall to the floor, he couldn't stop staring and struggled to keep his jaw from hitting the floor.

Her skin was olive and silky, her breasts perfect and round with small areolas and pale pinkish-brown nipples that pebbled from the

coolness of his house.

“Where should I get comfortable?” she questioned Loire.

“Linx, make yourself useful and get the portable table out of my Expedition.”

Her words broke through and his eyes wandered up to Trista’s eyes. She was glaring at him like he had three heads. “What’s the matter? I’m sure you have seen more than your fair share of breasts. She can’t do my tattoo if I have my bra on. You’re a grown American male—I thought you would be a bit more mature about this. Instead, you’re acting like a teenage boy who is glimpsing

his first pair of tits in real life.”

Linx felt his face flood with color as he blushed and Loire tossed him the keys to her SUV. As he walked out of the living room, he could hear their laughter and for some reason her reaction to his gaze upset him.

He knew from talking to her that she wasn't a vestal virgin but he didn't think she would be so wonton about her sexuality either. He had to keep reminding himself that she had grown up in a mostly male environment where nudity didn't mean anything. It's not like she would be getting frisky with him after her tattoo anyway.

Perhaps that's what had him so bothered. The whole "look but don't touch" vibe was pissing him the fuck off. She was in his home. Who the fuck did this chick think she was?

Chapter Thirteen

I ADMIT THAT stripping the way did was a bit bold, and maybe even downright mean, but it was totally worth it when Linx turned beet red. I'd seriously thought that since he'd seen so many pairs of tits on tour that mine would barely be noticed. Obviously, this wasn't the case and I felt bad as he stormed out.

“I suppose maybe I should put my

bra back on. I don't want him mad at me for pulling a stupid little stunt I thought he would find hilariously cheesy on my part."

Loire rolled her eyes. "Linx is usually the cool cucumber of the group. He's got the major hots for you. How old are you again? Sixteen? Seventeen? It's a dangerous game you're playing, baby girl—"

"I'm eighteen." I crossed my arms, covering my naked breasts. "I have never dated a guy my age. My ex was twenty-two and I thought he would be okay with seeing me half-naked. I suppose I probably come off looking like some kind of skank

but...I really want this tat to be perfect and I am not as modest about my body as I should be.”

“You’re fine, as long as you’re legal.”

Our conversation ceased the minute Linx walked back in with a fold-over contraption that resembled a picnic table. He set it up, not saying a word, and I couldn’t help but continuing to cover my breasts with my arms until he was finished and I could finally lie down.

The table had a pillow-top type of foam which was comfortable, yet firm. I could easily lie on my stomach comfortably; my breasts

hopefully out of sight and out of mind.

Loire began to sterilize her equipment and set up for my session, when I looked down at bare feet and a hand that held a double shot of amber liquid.

I glanced up at Linx, keeping my chest pressed firmly to the table-bed. “What’s that for?”

“It’s going to take a while for your tattoo. She might have to do it in two sessions since it’s almost midnight. It’s going to hurt like a son of a bitch because she will be pressing against bone. Do you have a high tolerance for pain?”

I thought about his words, thinking I was pretty chicken shit when it came to pain, both emotionally and physically. Especially seeing as how I'd numbed myself with scotch and Xanax for the last six weeks.

"Not really," I responded, grabbing the glass and downing it in two long swallows. It was foul and certainly not scotch.

"What in God's name is that? It tastes awful." I made a face of disgust and had him hand me what was left of my Heineken.

"Are you insulting Jack Daniels? It's some of the best American

whiskey ever made.”

I met his blue eyes and we stared one another down. “Yes, I have had Jack Daniels before, but I still think it’s foul. I don’t usually drink whiskey. When I’m in the mood for hard alcohol, I drink scotch—Macallan to be precise.”

He whistled in a way that I knew was deliberately mocking me, because it got his mind off seeing my goodies. I let him get away with it since I couldn’t imagine the humiliation I’d already put him through.

“I didn’t realize you were a woman with such expensive tastes.

Beats the hell out of my ex-wife but we'll just leave that subject alone."

Although he was a rock star, he certainly wasn't a man-whore and seemed to enjoy staying in the background. He also didn't come across as the attention seeking type. Fans of Linx liked him because he was dark, brooding and seemed serious more often than not.

It was rumored that he wasn't into random groupies and that he rarely took a woman to bed unless he liked her as a person. There was still hope left in the world, when a man like Linx had some respect for women, and didn't think we were

only good for what was between our legs or on our chests.

I smiled at him, even as I was contemplating about him, and Loire had already started working on my elaborate tattoo. I don't think I could have gotten through it had he not been there. He kept up a string of chatter about the latest inside rumors in the music industry, which had Loire and I both in stitches. At one point, she had to stop working on my tattoo, she'd laughed so long and hard.

“Well, we know who to avoid the next time we're out in a club,” I responded finally. after one of his

stories about a certain rock star who'd gotten it on with a young actress. He'd left her with his semen running down her leg when she exited the ladies room.

Linx's smile disappeared as he grabbed my hands. My arms were stretched out in front of me and my hands felt nice within the calloused palms of his own. It was a quiet gesture of support because Loire had gotten to the names and every time the needle hit my spine, I wanted to scream. I didn't ever want to know what a spinal tap felt like, if just getting a tattoo was this bad.

“Almost done, baby,” Linx

murmured. "You've been a trooper."

"Thanks," I replied through gritted teeth. "I think."

"Seriously, I knew you were badass, but what you have just been through...all I can say is wow. I don't think I was that calm when I got the guns and roses tattoo on my chest. I'm pretty sure I was downing Jack Daniels by the bottle and trying not to wince."

"Who did it?" I asked, my voice quiet.

Linx looked at me again with those gorgeous eyes that demanded my attention and I couldn't dare

look away. There was just something so magnetic about his stare, I didn't *want* to turn away.

"Nil did it. He's Seth's brother and Loire's partner."

"Oh." I didn't know what else to say because I was too busy focusing past the pain that had intensified again.

Loire busied herself, finishing up my tattoo. It definitely hurt more than I'd imagined it would.

"Just breathe," Linx instructed in the velvety-smooth voice of his, and I squeezed harder on his hands.

There was such care and

gentleness in his words and actions with me; I didn't realize I probably was cutting off his blood supply until his hands turned stark white from where I was squeezing them.

“All done!” Loire announced, her voice excited as she cleaned me up and bandaged the whole area of my back with saran wrap. She applied hypo-allergenic paper tape to keep the saran wrap in place.

I sat up and Linx helped me back into my dress while Loire gave me instructions on the care and cleaning of my new tattoo.

“In eight hours or so, remove the saran wrap and the tape. You are

allowed warm baths or showers but do not expose the tattooed flesh to a high-pressure shower head, or to the sun, not yet at least. The best thing you can do is run cold water over the area for about a minute after you are through bathing. That will close the pores and prevent loss of pigmentation for the tattoo.

“Keep your tattoo moisturized with vitamin D for the first week so it can heal properly. No scented or perfumed lotions are to be used whatsoever. After about a week, you should be fine and can go back to your usual habits. If you have any issues or questions, call Linx here.

As you can see, he's already inked down, so if anyone is a tattoo expert, it's him."

"Wait, do you have tattoos on your legs?" I questioned him in a voice that didn't sound like my own. It was girly and...immature.

"No, I don't. Just on my arms, stomach, chest, and my shoulder blades. To be honest, I never really wanted any on my legs either."

"Oh, okay."

"My mom and dad are already mortified by how much I have 'desecrated my body'. I like my legs the way they are and they will

continue to be tattoo-free.”

I laughed again as Loire folded her table and Linx picked it up.

“Lay down on the sofa, face down. I’ll be right back.”

I watched as he left with Loire and wondered why I’d decided to “mutilate” my body with a tattoo. My father would be turning over his grave if he knew.

Actually, both my parents would be a bit horrified if they knew. Tristan would worry I’d ruined my body for life even though he possessed a few hidden tattoos of his own. The thought occurred to me

that he no longer possessed anything since he was dead.

Linx returned shortly afterwards and sat next to me on the sofa.

“You see, it wasn’t that painful, was it?”

I shook my head though it was an outright lie. “No, it wasn’t bad at all.”

“Liar.” His face was dead serious until he smiled, putting me at ease. “You’re a very convincing liar, but I know that isn’t true. We both do. You’re really brave, do you know that?”

I looked down at the sofa and

said nothing to this statement. I felt, more often than not, like a coward who'd run away from my problems since I couldn't face the truth. My parents and brother were dead, and there would never be a happy ending to the so-called tragedy that was my life.

"I wish that was true," I finally murmured, as I rested my head on my arms.

"It is true, but you're just you're too scared to admit it. I'm a no bullshit kind of a guy and with everything you have been through, you're stronger than you think you are and that, in itself, is an

admirable quality. It makes you loveable and you are worthy of love and affection. Don't you ever forget that."

I didn't know what to say to a declaration like that so instead I said nothing. He moved closer to me on the sofa and allowed a comfortable silence to settle between us.

Linx began to stroke my hair gently, in a caring and relaxing pattern that soon had my eyes closing. Before I knew it, I'd fallen asleep on his sofa.



OVER THE NEXT six weeks that followed, after our impromptu tattoo session together, I began to spend a lot of time with Linx at the studio. The band was quite busy since they were recording their new album, which had undergone several name changes before it was accurately titled *Delusions of Lost Love*.

At first Talia was reluctant to let me follow her to the studio because she didn't understand why I didn't want to hang out with anyone my own age.

"It's boring—you said so yourself—so why the change of heart now?"

“I don’t want to be in the house alone. Besides, it gives me a chance to see you in action. I love watching you sing.” I refrained from pointing out to her that I didn’t even *know* anyone my own age here.

“And Linx. Let’s not forget about him shall we?” Talia chuckled out loud, as we sat in the back of her chauffeur-driven silver Cadillac Escalade. “Have you fucked him yet?”

I felt my whole face flame up with embarrassment. “No! We usually hang out at the Viper Room or the Sky Bar and then go back to his place. We have barely even

kissed, let alone done anything else..." I trailed off as I looked down at my interlocked fingers.

"Good because he's not the man for you." Talia adjusted her back in the seat and placed her hand on her growing baby bump.

"What the hell does that mean?" I rubbed the back of my neck where I'd recently gotten another tat, a small single rose that was an exact replica of one of the roses on Linx's chest.

I liked him...a lot. More than any man I'd ever met, if I were being honest. We talked with one another like two adults and he treated me

like his equal. We did incredibly boring shit together, but had fun doing it because we were together. I'd met his two sons, Jimi and Brady. They were adorable and it pleased me that they liked me. I liked them back and we'd had the time of our lives at the L.A. Zoo. Yet, here was my cousin telling me she didn't think he was appropriate for me and I wanted to know why.

“He's got two kids and a fucking crazy ex-wife who would probably slit your throat if she knew about you. Linx is a sweet guy, but he's damaged beyond repair. He isn't fit for a relationship—”

“—says the woman who is pregnant by a man who is on and off with his junkie girlfriend, while you string your junkie kinda ex-boyfriend along?” I snapped in anger. “I’m an adult, Talia. I love you, but I have been taking care of myself for a while now. I appreciate the room and the board, and the job of course, but...please stay out of my personal life.”

“Look at you!” she exclaimed. “Your mother and father would kill me if they saw you now. You’ve got a tattoo on the back of your neck and a huge ass fucking tattoo on your back. The old you wouldn’t have

dared to ‘desecrate’ your body the way you have.”

“I don’t look at tats as desecration, Talia, and neither do you. You have a half a sleeve on your right arm, from below your elbow almost to your wrist! You have tons of tats—why the fuck did you ‘desecrate’ your body?” I used air quotes to emphasize the word desecrate, which was probably a little childish, but I couldn’t help it—I was angry.

“It was my body to do whatever I wanted to do with it. Plus, I’m a rock star. It’s not like I can’t get rid of them when I start to get old and

wrinkly. That's totally not the point, because I wouldn't—every single one of them means something to me. I understand the memorial on your back, but what the fuck is up with the rose?”

“It's how Lennon sees me,” I began in a soft voice. “He calls me his little rose. I copied one of the tats on his chest and had it duplicated by Loire. It's small, see?” I pulled up my hair to show Talia.

“Don't fall in love with this fucking guy, Trista. He isn't *ready* for another relationship and he will just break your heart. Be his friend if you want, but don't start something he

won't be able to finish. You're just asking for a world of hurt and I don't want that to happen to you." She massaged her bump again as her face grimaced.

"You okay?"

"Yeah, baby boy didn't like the jalapeno chili cheese fries I ate for lunch and he's starting to kick a lot. I already called Dr. Rogers, he says I'm fine and so is the baby. We've done every test known to man and the baby is healthy and growing." Talia smiled. "I'm more scared of giving birth than I am of being pregnant if you can believe it."

I grabbed my cousin's hand and

held it. “Listen, I won’t get hurt... even if I do fall for Linx and he breaks my heart. I don’t want you to worry about me, Tal. You just worry about giving birth to a healthy baby boy and that no-good father of his. Sooner or later, Jaden is going to have to make a decision. Then again, once a Cox, always a cock.”

“Do you have first-hand experience with any of the Cox men?” she asked me, her brow arching.

“Um, no. Dad would have murdered me himself. Mom and Dad did the books for them and laundered money for the Saints’

club.” I picked at the cuticle of my thumb. “The Bastards’ didn’t care—they knew it was business and besides, Trey would have never allowed our parents to betray his club. No one suspects the Saints or the Bastards of their murders but they have gone kind of postal on the White Knights.

“Brooklyn Decker threatened me the night of that get together in the Costco parking lot. He told me to ‘call the dogs off’ but I don’t have that kind of power over my brother. Trey does what he wants and the hits are sanctioned. It’s not my fault if they are decimating the ranks of

the Knights.”

“That’s what I’m talking about. What would Linx do if the Knights came back to make good on their promise?”

I rolled my eyes. “Nothing is going to happen to me, Talia.”

Luckily, she allowed the subject to drop as we arrived at the studio and I helped Talia out before she strolled into the studio.

Linx leaned against the side of the building in the official Smoking Area, watching me as he dragged from a Camel.

I walked toward him and placed

my arms around the small of his back. I leaned against him, on tip toe, and kissed his lips. He tasted like tobacco. It was his taste and bothered me less than it usually would have.

“What’s Talia’s problem?” he asked as he wrapped an arm around my waist and pulled me closer.

“She’s scared you’re not a good influence on me. She doesn’t think you are relationship material and I am stupid for getting my hopes up that we could be anything more than friends. She believes Cassidy has damaged you beyond repair, and you’re going to break my heart.”

He looked down at me, his blue eyes bright and shimmery with pain. “What do you think?”

“I call bullshit. Horrible tragedies happen to people all the time and no matter how broken a person is, they can still heal and go on to have a perfectly respectable relationship.”

I leaned my head against his chest and felt his heart beating in his chest. “You’re not damaged beyond repair and yes, your ex *did* a number on you, but if I can move past my family’s deaths then you can heal yourself too. Cassidy treated you like a piggy bank and you both used and abused each other, but it

wasn't all bad. Think about the two beautiful babies you two made. They are good and pure. Not everything about your relationship with Cassidy was poison and destruction."

Linx smiled down at me as he ground his cigarette out in the ashtray provided and wrapped both his hands around my neck. "Your cousin is right. I don't deserve you and you're much too intelligent for a fucking jerk like me. You make me feel like I can be a better person. I never thought I would say that about an eighteen year old girl," he murmured.

Our lips were only inches apart

before I made the move and pressed mine against his. He grabbed the back of my neck and pulled me into him. His fingers pressed against the newer tat, hurting a little, but I didn't care. As my mouth opened, he claimed my tongue with his tobacco soaked one and I moaned into the kiss.

“What the *fuck* is going on here?” a male voice inquired, full of rage.

I looked up and turned toward the angry voice.

“Who's that?” Linx wondered as a tall, tattooed biker stalked toward us.

“That, sweetie, is a Demon’s Bastard and my brother...Trey.”

Chapter Fourteen

LINX DIDN'T SCARE easy; on didn't grow up in South Boston without learning how to fight. Trey, Trista's brother, however, had a major advantage over him. He was holding a silver nine millimeter in his left hand as if it were an extension of his body. He'd been around violent people enough to know that only true gun experts

held their gun like that.

He glared into those dead, hazel-green eyes and could see the resemblance between him and Trista though he and Trey had the same coloring. His skin was slightly tanned and he wore three-day-old stubble on his rugged face.

“What are you doing here?” Trista asked but she merely glanced at the gun before her eyes wandered back to her brother’s face.

There wasn’t a shred of fear in her eyes. This woman was harder than he’d ever imagined and wouldn’t break if he made a mistake. She was the real deal, a strong

woman, who had survived the deaths of most of her family. After all of the murder and mayhem in her past, he could still coax a genuine smile out of her.

“Who is this motherfucker with his hands all over you?” Trey demanded, pushing his sister out of the way as he aimed the gun directly in Linx’s face. The safety was off; one wrong move and his brains would be all over the ground.

“I’m Lennon ‘Linx’ Carter, bassist for Winter’s Regret and your sister’s...boyfriend.”

Did he just fucking say he was Trista’s boyfriend?

They hadn't even discussed their relationship status; what if she didn't want him like that? What if she'd already friend-zoned his ass? Perhaps she was looking for more of a "friends with benefits" situation or an occasional bootie-call.

Trista pushed past her brother, moving the aimed gun away from Linx's head before she jumping into his arms. "Really? That's news to me but I'll take it!" She kissed him on the lips as his heart thundered in his chest. When they broke away, he saw the huge smile on her face. She definitely seemed ok with his assessment.

“When did this happen? Looks like you two weren’t *that* cozy before,” another male voice said.

Linx spotted a guy with dirty blond hair who was scowling behind Trey.

“What the *fuck* is he doing here?” Trista asked Trey. “I told you. We are through, Clooney, and you’ll never get any of this pussy again, so shut the fuck up and mind your own damn business!”

He backed off quickly, as she ended their intimate embrace and wrapped her arms around his waist.

“Listen, I didn’t come here to

start anything. I just wanted to know if you have been in any danger these past few weeks? I know Brooklyn Decker made a trip here six weeks ago, and I hoped he didn't decide to pay you a visit."

"He did." Trista breathed deeply. "Talía is ultra-paranoid, Trey. She has two bodyguards on me at all times and they're ex-Navy SEALs for fuck's sake. I'm fine."

"What about you, Romeo?" Trey inquired as he glared directly at Linx. "When my sister is with you, is she safe?"

"Her bodyguards don't exactly leave her side. They sleep in my

guest bedrooms when she spends the night.”

“Trey, you haven’t answered my question. What are you doing here in L.A.? You didn’t ride your Harley all the way from Pine Bluff to ask me about Brooklyn Decker.” Trista asked, interrupting the interrogation.

Linx watched the interaction between Trista and her brother with interest. It was obvious they were siblings but there was a distinct hostile tone in her voice and her body language had become defensive. She acted like she was annoyed and aggravated by his

presence instead of relieved.

“Club business.” He glared at her, hazel-green eyes cold as an Eskimo’s dick. “I also wanted to check in on my little sister—is that a crime?”

“No but we’ll have to finish this conversation later at Talia’s house. Winter’s Regret is recording today in the studio and if we’re not upstairs in five minutes, Linx is going to be late.” She adjusted the pink, short-sleeved babydoll blouse she wore with a pair of dark blue jeans and black, four-inch booties. “Then again, you’ve always had impeccably *bad* timing.”

“Fine. Tell Talia to expect me—”

“Oh, and leave your shadow at whatever clubhouse you guys are stayin’ in. He’s not welcome at Talia’s.”

Clooney glared at both Linx and Trista before he turned on his black biker-boots and hopped back on his Harley. Trey finally walked away without saying goodbye, and climbed on the back of his beast. The Harleys roared to life, the noise they made as they tore out of the parking lot seeming obnoxiously loud.

Linx pulled her closer to him and breathed in the luxurious scent of her hair and the smell of vanilla and

freesia on her skin, letting her envelope him completely. He pulled her hair to the side and gently stroked the back of her neck. She tensed in his arms for a moment, before her body relaxed and molded with his.

Their kiss was perfectly natural as his lips sought out hers. As his tongue gently teased hers, there was a playful, yet sexually charged, energy in the air. His mouth devoured her, and he could no longer deny the obvious. He not only wanted her to be his but he was ready to possess her in every way there was for a man to possess a

woman.

Linx's emotions exhilarated and frightened him down to the core of his being. He'd never thought he would ever feel this way about a woman again and now those old familiar feelings were returning as his heart raced along with Trista's. Instinctively, he knew as he fell faster and faster into an unknown oblivion that he couldn't stop the inevitable from happening, not even if it was what he truly desired—he didn't want to stop. He wanted to be with Trista and adored every moment they spent together

She was his and he would make

sure he knew her inside and out before the day was through.



LINX COULDN'T HAVE been more pleased with the way the jam at the studio turned out. Not only did they record a new song for their upcoming album, but he, Kris, and Niko insisted they re-record the old songs from the two previous albums with Talia. This pissed Seth off and he walked out without saying good bye to anyone.

Linx had known Seth his whole life and was good friends with his twin brother, Nil, who was also a

recovering addict. Since Nil had cleaned up he'd become so straight-laced that he only smoked cigarettes and never touched anything else, including alcohol. Since the tour had ended, however, if Seth left the group, he seriously thought it wouldn't be that big of a loss. He brought the whole mood down with his shitty attitude and everyone left the studio each day that much more vexed because of him.

The rest of the band stuck around and managed to record four of the old songs from the first album. There were only two more to go and that album would be

complete. Both Niko and Linx had great voices, equally as strong as Seth's, so they did backup vocals on the tracks and the re-written lyrics were better than the original versions.

It took all the concentration he could muster to only think about recording and not about Trista's hot, tight body. She watched him and occasionally spoke to the engineers, but everyone could see everyone else through their little glass boxes. It was Introspect Records' way of making sure there no funny business going on at the studio, as well as to keep an eye on the ex-junkies they

had under their employment. The whole building was wired with cameras, even the bathrooms, though they were tilted at a level that would not embarrass anyone in the toilets yet low enough to see any drug use that might potentially happen.

Linx didn't know how legal or ethical it was, but it gave him a certain sense of security. He'd never had an issue with drugs, so he didn't know what it was like. His only weakness was cigarettes, alcohol and occasionally, chronic, but he didn't do the hard stuff. He hadn't indulged in coke since meeting

Trista.

He had this nagging, clichéd feeling of wanting to be a better man for Trista. The need to indulge just wasn't there anymore. *She* was his drug of choice and all the speed he would ever need. He realized in that moment that he may be falling in love with her.

Wait, when did *that* happen? Sure, he knew he liked her a lot but when had it turned into the overwhelming feeling of wanting to be around her all the time? She never bored him, and she never lied. She wasn't a deceptive person by nature and he loved that about her.

He forgot about all of his feelings, his thoughts, and his colleagues when he placed his bass in its case and walked out of the glass booth to meet Trista. She grabbed his free hand and they walked outside to the parking lot. “I don’t want to force you to do anything you don’t want to do, but... I’m pretty sure I want to take our relationship to the next level,” he told her quietly as they walked.

“*The next level?*” Trista teased him, poking him in the ribs with her free hand. “And how much on-the-side action have you been getting while you were waiting to take ‘us’

to the next level?”

Linx looked down at her, directly in her eyes, pain filling his eyes. “Just because I’m a ‘rock star’ doesn’t mean I am a man-whore or a fucking douchebag. I. Don’t. Cheat. Not even when Cassidy and I were having problems and she withheld sex as ‘punishment’. I’m a good little Irish Catholic guy who is completely faithful when I become involved with someone.”

Trista stopped walking and he lost his grip on her hand. “What do you mean you don’t cheat? You admitted to sleeping with another woman while you were married.”

“I did sleep with another woman...*after* her ultimate betrayal, which I will tell you about some other time. The man who fucked another woman while married to Cassidy—I’m not *him* anymore. I wouldn’t ever act so immaturely ever again.”

She looked down, speaking to the asphalt as she inquired, “How long have you considered us involved? I mean, I haven’t been with anyone since Clooney and that was just before...”

He turned toward her and brought her face up to his with his index finger, until they stared into

one another's eyes. "Since you showed me those delectable tits of yours when you got your tattoo. Even before then, I hadn't slept with a woman in a while. The last time I got laid was when we were on tour in Japan. I met this great young woman and we had this amazing conversation." He held his hand up, stopping her before she could speak.

"I'm only telling you this because I don't want you to think that I just whip it out and throw a jimmy on just because a woman is hot. Been there, done that—bought the fuckin' tee shirt, too. I admit to cheating on Cassidy before we got married, but

once I put that ring on her finger, I became another person. She didn't take our vows as seriously as I did and my retaliation to what she did was really fucking stupid. I'm not perfect, but I will be a better man for you because we're worth it—you're worth it. My only regret is that Cassidy and I, we...divorced instead of getting an annulment. I can't give that to you...a big, beautiful Catholic wedding."

Trista wrapped her arms around his neck. "I don't give a shit about that. Everyone I love is dead...except Trey," she murmured. "Fuck, I can't believe you are talking about

marriage and you haven't you haven't even taken me for a test drive yet."

Linx kissed her and she responded, pressing her body against his. He wrapped an arm around her waist as their mouths opened to one another and soon, they were deeply intertwined, his tongue swirling in her beautiful mouth before he nibbled on her lower lip. He wanted her too much; his cock was so hard, it was painful.

They finally separated and their lips were slightly swollen. "I don't do half-assed affairs. I trust my instincts and I have never felt more for

another woman than I feel for you. Call it fucking lust if you want, since we've known each other for less than two months, but I do know I don't want to let you go. You're like a wounded bird and I want to protect you from seeing any more ugly shit. You get what I'm sayin'?"

Trista nodded. "Are you suggesting we do what I think you're suggesting? Something completely impulsive, random, out of character, and ridiculously crazy?"

"Abso-fucking-lutely. Let's go to Vegas and just do it. You can be my teenage bride and you'll belong to me. No one—not even Talia—can

interfere with us if we're married."

She looked at him for a long time as his heart thundered in his chest. What if she thought he was crazy? Hell, he didn't even know what he was doing, but it felt right and he always followed his instincts.

Always.

They'd never steered him wrong before.

His instincts told him not to marry Cassidy, despite her being pregnant, but he had to. His parents would have been mortified if he hadn't.

Now, he made up his own rules

and answered to no one. He wanted this beautiful, gorgeous woman to be his wife and then he would have Loire complete the tattoo on his forearm. It bothered him that Trista's name *wasn't* above the ampersand.

The prolonged silence between them was killing him and he wanted her to say something—*anything*—at this point.

Trista suddenly smiled before she bit her lower lip. “Hell fuckin’ yeah. I’ll marry you, Lennon Carter.”

He took her into his arms and kissed her long and hard. “Come on. We’ll drive out tonight—”

“Let’s take my car. You can drive but I have Nevada plates. We’ll look less conspicuous.”

“What about your bodyguards?”

She shrugged casually. “Don’t worry, I’ll figure out a way to get rid of them.”

Linx stared at her and smiled before they both broke into laughter.

Chapter Fifteen

FOR THE FIRST two hours as we drove to Vegas, I thought a part of me had mentally left the building. I was about to marry a man I hadn't even known for two months.

Of course, the further away from L.A. we drove and the closer to Vegas we got, my whole thought process changed. I wasn't doing anything all that crazy or strange. I

was acting on my own accord and I was perfectly sober. I couldn't legally drink but I could marry this crazy, beautiful, fucked-up rocker, who turned out to be normal in comparison to me.

The real reason why I said yes, among other things, was because I needed a family, one to call my own. Linx had Brady and Jimi. They would become my step-sons, and he would be my husband. I would no longer be dependent on my cousin and I could call my own shots. That was appealing to me and I couldn't get that fantasy out of my head.

Linx Carter had asked me to

marry him.

Me!

I wasn't anyone special, just an attractive young woman who didn't know quite where she fit in this huge universe of people. I did know one thing, though: when I was with Linx, I felt *normal*, like the old me. He made me feel like I was special and the most precious creature alive.

In many ways, he reminded me of my father.

He came from a solid, Irish-Catholic background and was a grounded human being. Fame

hadn't gone to his head and underneath all the tattoos, he was a decent man who wanted a wife and a family. He wanted a home and someone there that truly cared about him as a person and not about his status as a "bad-boy rocker".

I felt safe with Linx because he gave me a sense of comfort and peace. I instantly relaxed in his presence and, like my father, he never raised his voice. He was loving and kind despite the undercurrents that ran through him. I knew he had an inner strength as well as a temper that he'd come to terms with and hid quite well. I

didn't have to second-guess myself around him and he'd been so patient—the whole time we'd spent time together, he'd never once tried to pressure me into sex.

I wasn't a virgin; I knew what to do and what went where. Clooney had pretty much carved me out and we'd had more than our fair share of sex. With Linx and I, it was almost like we both knew there was so much more between us and we were waiting...for what exactly, I truly didn't know.

We didn't arrive in Vegas until after ten p.m. but the Marriage License Bureau downtown was still

open. There were a few couples in front of us but other than that, it took less than a half an hour.

“Oh my God!” the clerk said loudly, as she looked at our paperwork. “You’re Linx Carter from Winter’s Regret?”

Then it hit me. I was about to marry someone who was fucking famous. How long would it take for the news to get out if this random chick knew who he was?

“Yes, I am,” he replied quietly, pulling out a certified copy of his divorce decree, which proved his marriage to Cassidy had been legally dissolved, and presented it along

with our driver's licenses.

“Pine Bluff? Isn't that in Northern Nevada?” the clerk inquired, green eyes still wide as they flicked from Linx to me.

“Yeah. It's pretty much smack dab in the middle—between Reno and Lake Tahoe.”

“Oh. My. God. I have never had the opportunity to take anyone's application who was famous! Wait until I tell my friends—they are going to be so crushed you're off the market!”

I stared at Linx and he looked at me before he shrugged his

shoulders.

What could I say to such an asinine comment? Neither her nor her friends would have ever had the opportunity to meet, let alone marry this man. Why would they care whether he was “off the market” or not?

Neither one of said anything but we both smiled at her.

She collected the sixty dollar fee, and issued us a license. I breathed, relieved, since we couldn't get married without one.

Afterwards, Linx drove us to the Cosmopolitan Hotel & Casino where

we would be staying while there in Las Vegas. Linx had already booked a suite for us with a wraparound terrace and it was the ultimate in luxury. I loved it, especially the view of all the other glitzy hotels spread before us.

“Go shower,” he said after I did a quick walkthrough of the place. “I have a shopper coming up to get your measurements, so she can buy you a gown for the ceremony.”

“What about you?”

“I’ll have one after you’re done. I ordered my tux when we were checking in. I decided to go classic, a black suit by Armani. But you can

have anything you want... understand?"

I nodded my head and numbly walked into the bathroom, stripping out of my clothes and taking a shower. The bathroom was suitably stocked, but Linx had somehow gotten a Victoria's Secret gift basket brought up that came with a variety of lotions and body sprays. I chose my favorite and moisturized my skin before I spritzed my whole body in my own perfume. I breathed in my signature scent of freesia and vanilla that mixed together on my skin. The combination calmed me, easing the butterflies in my stomach.

I walked out of the bathroom clad in a terry cloth robe, courtesy of the Cosmopolitan Hotel. A small-boned blonde with pale blue eyes and creamy skin spoke to Linx, the personal shopper, I presumed. It was obvious she knew who he was despite her smart pale pink dress and matching sky-high Christian Louboutin high heels.

“...yeah, I was at that concert. My best friend and I saw you and Scarlet Fever in concert over at MGM Grand when you guys played the Garden Arena. It was an awesome show. I was blown away and I hope you guys will come back now that

Talia is the lead singer. That chick is fucking bad ass. She and Pink are the two toughest chicks in rock at the moment. Don't get me wrong, I love The Pretty Reckless and Trilogy, but Taylor and Juli are just *girls*, not women. I love Talia and her voice. She's made Winter's Regret, like, a thousand times better, you know?"

I cleared my throat, afraid if I didn't interrupt, that the bitch would never stop brown-nosing Linx.

She looked toward me and her face became professional. "I've brought my book for you to browse,

Ms. Lennon.”

“I already know the dress I want.”

Linx took the opportunity to walk past us, stopping to brush his lips lightly across my temple as he passed, before entering the bedroom, where the bathroom was located, and closing the double doors behind him.

I admit that I'd cheated, having used my iPad to peruse Polyvore to save myself time. I found the perfect cream-colored dress by Phase Eight. I'd never heard of them, but the dress, ironically called the “Pollyanna Dress”, was the perfect

cocktail wedding dress.

It was sleeveless and would show off part of the tattoo on my back, but I didn't care. The color, beads, and pearl details had sold me on it. That, and it wasn't the least bit frou-frou. It would end just above my knees and was slightly longer in the back.

"We actually have it in stock," the shopper, whose name was Kelly, told me.

"That's great." I smiled at her and stared back. "It should save us time."

She placed her creamy hand on my shoulder. "Listen, he gave you an unlimited budget. If you are going to

go so cheap with the dress, then you should at least compensate with a pair of designer heels. Personally, I love Yves Saint Laurent and Christian Louboutin myself.”

“Yep, I like these,” I said to her as I displayed on my iPad a silver-white pair of Christian Louboutin wrap high-heels. They had a modest four-inch heel, a half-inch platform and were peep-toe.

“Those are perfect.” She smiled, though it never reached her eyes. “I’ll have the bell boy bring the items up to the room and we can get you dressed. Would you like me to order a matching bra and panty set

from La Perla as well?”

“Yes. That would be perfect.”

“Anything else?”

“Um, several pairs of jeans and some trendy tops. Also, can you get me a pair of black, Doc Marten combat boots, as well as another pair of heels in black?”

“Sure. I will also take the liberty to order another cocktail dress for a nice dinner out, if you so choose. This way, you will be prepared for anything during your stay at our fabulous hotel.”

“That sounds wonderful!” I exclaimed before I walked away and

stood in front of the open, floor to ceiling glass windows. I heard Kelly leave, as the door to the suite opened and closed behind me, but didn't turn around.

The view was exquisite. I still couldn't believe this was happening; I was about to marry Linx Carter and become a man's *wife*. Not a tired-ass old lady—and yes, bikers did get married too—but a wife and step-mother with no true dysfunction in our lives.

The only future problem I felt unsure about happened to be with how his ex-wife would take our sudden and unexpected nuptials.

Somehow, I couldn't see her happy about Linx being with anyone unless it was her and that was *never* going to happen—he'd assured me enough times, he started to sound like a broken record.

I'd met Cassidy on a few occasions and although she wasn't thrilled Linx was dating at all let alone me, she was pleasant and refined for someone from South Boston. The only remotely wacky thing about her were the black streaks running through her naturally blonde hair. However, dating someone and marrying someone were totally different and

she struck me as the type of person likely to go postal.

It occurred to me I hadn't checked my phone while I'd been busy checking out dresses and shoes on my iPad. There were several texts from Talia and rather than text her back, I stepped out onto the terrace, closed the glass door, and called my cousin.

"Hey, I was worried about you!" Talia answered without a greeting. "Marco said you ditched him and Jared—what's that all about? I pay them very handsomely to watch your ass so just what the *hell* are you up to, Trista?"

I rolled my eyes and thanked God she couldn't see me do it. "I'm with Linx and we wanted to make love without an audience—"

"Bullshit, Trista. You're not at his house. I already had them check there, along with every high-priced hotel here in L.A. Must I start checking San Diego too?"

"No, don't bother because we aren't in the country," I lied smoothly. "Linx surprised me with a trip to Mexico, and no, I am not going to tell you where we are because I don't want to be followed."

Talia laughed out loud. "Do you *really* think I am that stupid? I gave

you the cell phone you have and I traced this call...let's see...to Las Vegas, not Mexico. What are you doing in the City of Sin? You're not old enough to drink or gamble."

"Linux likes to gamble—"

"Yes, I know that. But what are you going to do while he is playing Blackjack or Three-Card Poker?"

I began to pace. "Listen, we're staying at the Cosmopolitan Hotel. We're in a suite and you are on our approved list of contacts. You can reach me any time you want. We're only going to be gone for a few days, but I promise we'll be back by Monday afternoon. He won't miss

any studio time.”

“I don’t give a damn about studio time, Trista. What the hell is going on with you? Are you sure you know what you’re doing? Don’t do anything you’ll live to regret.”

I didn’t really have anything to say to a statement like that.

Something I’d regret? I was pretty much all out of regrets. My parents were dead and so was my older brother. I should have been at Tristan and Taryn’s wedding, yet instead, their coffins were buried next to one another and now, they would never have the chance to get married.

“I think it’s a bit late for regrets.”

“Trista, I’m sorry. I’m pregnant and hormonal for fuck’s sake. Plus, Trey came by and he went mental when you weren’t here. What was I supposed to say? I didn’t know where you were either. I couldn’t get rid of him and when Jaden dropped by, it turned ugly,” Talia’s voice was soft. “The only reason they didn’t break out into a fist fight was because of me. Trey blames the Saints for your parents’ death—he said they were working for the club. Is that true?”

I sighed out loud as a pair of masculine arms wrapped around my

waist. “Yes, they were working for the club, but not the way you think. They were just accountants, Talia. They didn’t do anything wrong and Jonesy never had a problem with Mom and Dad working for Dizzy. There wasn’t that kind of animosity between the clubs as long as everyone knew their place.”

“Not true.” Talia breathed into the phone. “You can’t tell anyone but the FBI was looking into your parents’ activities. They got the IRS involved. Everything except the house and your trust fund is frozen, Trista. They couldn’t touch the house because you’re on the Deed of

Trust. You were the default owner if something happened to them.”

“What? That can’t be true...”

“*That* comes from both Trey and Jaden. They would know better than anyone else.” Talia sighed, sounding resigned. “Just do whatever it is you’re doing in Vegas and get your ass back to L.A., okay?”

I nodded my head, though I knew she couldn’t see me. “Fine, I’m nodding. See you on Monday.”

“Okay, I love you and take care of yourself.”

“Will do. Love you too.”

I ended the call and turned,

wrapping my arms around Linx's neck.

“Why did you tell her where we were?” he asked before he kissed my lips.

I pulled back after our kiss ended. “She already knew. GPS tracking and what not. The phone is registered on her account. It can't be that hard for two ex-Navy SEALs to find out direct longitude and latitude. She has no clue what we're doing here, so who cares? We'll be married in less than an hour.”

He smiled and this time when he kissed me, his mouth devoured mine, and it was the absolute best

feeling. His lips suckled on my bottom lip before my mouth opened and was set on fire, the kiss turning into a soul-stirring lip-lock that had me coming up for breath.

Linx's lips trailed down to my neck as he pushed aside the lapels of my robe to display my breasts. His fingers squeezed my nipples until they were rock hard; it was an exquisite pain, and the feel of his calloused hands on my soft breasts caused heat to spread through my skin. My whole being ached with want and need.

His tongue replaced his fingers on my right breast, the warmth of

his breath and that beautiful organ in his mouth was intoxicating. I felt light-headed from the stir of emotions and my stomach burst with the wings of butterflies. The feeling between my legs was worse because I was so turned on, I just wanted him to take me; no prerequisites, nothing but his hard cock inside me.

As his mouth circled my nipple, sucking hard, his free hand reached between my legs and massaged my aching clit. He quickly plunged two fingers inside of me, eliciting a gasp from me at the sensation.

The orgasm he coaxed from my

body shook me to my very core and drenched his fingers in my juices. His mouth came to meet mine again and I moaned against it as his tongue forced its way between my lips, as he kissed me passionately, deeply. I stood on shaky legs as he withdrew his fingers and placed them in his mouth—fuck that was the ultimate turn on—before he grabbed me by the back of my neck and kissed me again.

A sudden knock on the window rudely interrupted us. We both looked to see Kelly, the shopper, smiling at us though her face was flushed like she'd run a marathon.

“How the hell did she get back inside our suite?” My heavy breathing tried to keep up with the thunderous beating of my heart.

Linx had completely and utterly did a number on me and the worst part was I never saw it coming.

“She’s got a card key to the room, babe.” He kissed me again quickly before he rested his head on my shoulder and stroked my back with gentle hands.

“My clothes must be here,” I whispered to him.

“I can’t wait to strip the dress off you later tonight,” he said to me, his

mouth close to my left ear.

We stared at one another and I could see, and feel, his desire for me. Neither of us attempted to move though the sooner we got rid of Kelly, the sooner we could get married and finally have sex.

“Why is it so important for us to be married before we make love?” I finally wondered out loud.

Linx leaned in to me and grabbed my face with both hands, his grip was loose. “Because you’re too good for scum like me. The only way I deserve you is if I honor you, make you truly mine. In terms of children, you can have some or

none...now or ten years from now, I don't care...I just want to be with you. To think you *actually* said yes...to someone like me."

I placed my hands on his face and looked deeply into those gorgeous, intoxicating blue eyes. "You're not scum or trash and I am *not* too good for you. That perception is all in your head. This is serious, Linx. We are promising forever, and we may mean it now, but what if we don't in the future?"

"That would make me a two-time loser. I could barely handle the first failure, I can't handle another. I will do everything humanly possible to

make you happy, Trista. I will work my ass off to show you that I didn't marry you in haste, or because I was too horny to go out and find a one night stand. I'm marrying you because at this point in my life, I want to be settled. I don't want to sleep with numerous women...one is more than enough for me, especially with a firecracker like you."

I laughed out loud then. "I resent that because I am *not* a firecracker!"

"Mmm, wanna bet?" his voice was seductive, enticing, and playful at the same time.

We both stared at one another and laughed yet again before we

finally gave Kelly some peace of mind and walked back inside, hand in hand.

Chapter Sixteen

LINX DIDN'T HAVE a single doubt in his mind that he was doing the right thing.

The days where he slept and left women were over. A six month tour could really put a person's life into perspective and Catholic guilt was enough to attack the most strong-willed of individuals.

Like most in South Boston, he

was both Irish and Catholic but his parents had taken Catholicism to the extreme and it showed in their children. Most became perfect little sheep, but Linx had broken away to become a depraved rock star. His twenty-two year old sister, Trinity, had dyed her pale, red hair, black and was a professional tattoo artist. She'd been talking about coming to L.A. for years but her boyfriend, Travis, and Kiki, her pit-bull, were in Seattle, so she was settled there for the time being.

Just thinking about his sister made him realize they didn't have any witnesses.

Trista was still in the bedroom getting dressed while Kelly paced nervously on the phone with The Little White Chapel. She finished the call and smiled in triumph.

“They have an opening in twenty minutes!”

“Would this be part of your official work description if I paid you and your friend, the one who attended the concert with you last September, to be witnesses at the wedding? A thousand a piece.”

Kelly slapped her hands against her cheeks like Macaulay Culkin in *Home Alone*. “Are you kidding me? Let me just call her. She’ll probably

have to bring her asshole boyfriend. Is that okay?”

“The more the merrier, but Nevada only requires two witnesses if I read the pamphlet correctly.”

Kelly dialed and started speaking excitedly to her friend, but his eyes were glued on the bedroom doors as they opened. Trista came out in a beautiful cream-colored cocktail dress—she apparently had too much class to wear white, when she wasn’t a virgin—and the heels she wore emphasized her healthy olive complexion.

He started at her perfectly pedicured feet and allowed his gaze

to roam all the way up along her curves and womanly figure, perfect breasts and finally to her face. She wore a modest amount of makeup, only mascara to emphasize her bright blue eyes and red lipstick. She held a small cream clutch purse and approached him confidently, kissing him firmly on the lips.

Linx was surprised by her boldness. “Don’t worry, it’s a revolutionary lipstick that doesn’t rub off.” To be honest, he hadn’t cared if he wore her lip color.

Kelly ended her conversation and smiled brightly. “Okay, we’re a go. Trin is going to meet us there

without Travis, thank the Lord!”

Linx’s heart began to strum against his ribcage. “Your friend is Trinity...Carter?”

Kelly pursed her lips. “Yes, I know she’s your sister but we’ve been friends since we both lived in Seattle. She doesn’t talk about you—she values her privacy, and yours, so very few people know she’s your sister. Just me and Travis. I dread the day those two break up; I just know he will try to take Kiki as well as run to sell anything he knows about you to that dreadful tabloid, *Edge of Entertainment*. I can’t stand him. He’s a loser and a fucking

douchebag—excuse my language.”

“Wait—how long have they been living here? If she accompanied you to our concert last year, why didn’t she contact me? I would have gotten you two backstage passes. And how does she feel about witnessing me get married again?” He couldn’t help the inner panic he began to experience.

Trinity had been in Las Vegas for at least nine months and hadn’t bothered to contact him?

“Listen, she didn’t want to worry you, Lennon.” Kelly walked closer though she kept a natural distance between them. “She’s a grown

woman and she has never tried to use you or your name in any capacity to gain attention. She is just happy to see you again after so many months. She wants to do this... please, don't turn her away."

"We would never do that." Trista wrapped an arm around his waist. "I would love for your sister to be a witness to our wedding. She is the first sibling of yours I get to meet and I'm honored for her to be there."

Linx stared at his future bride before he looked at Kelly again. "I am anxious to see her again too and I hope she doesn't mind the

occasion or the reason why we are seeing each another.” He breathed deeply and exhaled. “Okay, you can accompany Trista and I in the limo then. Is that alright with you? I don’t want you to lose your job for doing this.”

“Oh, I won’t. I am going to make a ton of commission and Constanze—my supervisor—isn’t like that. All she cares about is keeping the guests satisfied. As long as no one tries to molest or hurt us, we can do what we want.”

Linux was more than ready to get the show on the road. Moments later, they all left the suite and

walked down to the hotel, through the lobby, and out to the valet area where a limo waited to pick them up.

He helped Trista in first before he aided Kelly with a careful hand and they drove off to The Little White Chapel.

Trinity was waiting for them out front in a midnight blue lace dress that looked more appropriate for clubbing than a wedding. The moment she saw him, she ran to her brother and hugged him. Her hair was still black and complimented blue-green eyes, the same color as their father's. His father had been

the one with the pale ginger hair and aquamarine eyes while their mother was a brunette with natural sandy highlights and cornflower blue eyes. They were a striking couple and all their children were a beautiful amalgamation of both parents, except Trinity and himself. She was a female version of their father and he was a male version of their mother.

“How are you, big brother? The occasion is a bit on the formal side but better to see you now than not at all. Are you going to introduce me to your bride?” She embraced him before she kissed his cheek.

“Well, communication works both ways, Trinity. Why didn’t you tell me you moved to Las Vegas?” he questioned after they separated.

“Trista Lennon,” his soon-to-be wife said before Trinity embraced her soon-to-be sister-in-law.

“Oh wow, you’re gorgeous. Has Cassidy met you yet? Wait, your last name Lennon? Don’t tell me... you’re Irish and from South Boston.”

“Uh, yes and no. My dad grew up in Dorchester but yes, he is—sorry, *was*—Irish Catholic. My mother was Creole, her family was originally from Louisiana—although she, too, grew up in the Beacon Hill area of

Boston—but...they're both
deceased.”

“Timothy Lennon is dead? My God, when did this happen? I am so very sorry for your loss.”

“Thank you.” Trista looked away. “It happened this past January and... I’m still not comfortable talking about it yet.”

“I can understand that. I’m sorry I brought it up—I didn’t mean to upset you.” Trinity smiled with a look of nostalgia. “Yeah, the Lennon Family is pretty well known, since they are one of the biggest criminal syndicates in Boston. Mom was in love with Callum Lennon, Tim’s

brother, but you know how it is. Our father just stepped in and swept my mother off her feet. I can't believe Mr. Lennon is dead and...you're his daughter?"

Trista nodded. "Well, he is and yes, I'm his daughter. My parents were good people but...they were at the wrong place at the wrong time."

"Well, good luck with this one," Trinity announced with a swift change of the subject. "He's a good man but he's stubborn as hell and never forgets a thing, so don't say anything you don't mean. He is bound to throw it back in your face when you have a disagreement."

Linx sighed loudly. “Can we make our way to the fucking chapel? I would like to marry Trista sometime this decade. I swear to fucking God this has been the longest night of my life!”

They all walked into the Little White Chapel and handed over the marriage license to the young, all-business woman. An older woman came in with an older gentleman at her side. They also acted as witnesses, though it would be Trinity and Kelly who would sign as the official witnesses to the wedding.

Their vows were basic and when

the rings were presented, Linx was prepared. They both had simple platinum bands purchased at Tiffany & Co located in Caesars Palace—courtesy of Kelly—an hour before the ceremony.

The minister finally said, “I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss your bride.”

Linx took the opportunity to lip lock with Trista, holding her tightly and not wanting to let her go. Kelly and Trinity clapped before Kelly pulled out a professional Nikon camera and began to take photos of them.

Suddenly his bride was

surrounded by Trinity and Kelly, who were telling her they had to have a girl's night out before they left Vegas.

He smiled, hoping she didn't feel too overwhelmed. This was nothing compared to the circus their marriage would cause when the press got wind of what they'd done.

Less than fifteen minutes later, all four prepared to leave the chapel. Unfortunately, several different teams of paparazzi had surrounded the chapel and were furiously taking photos.

"Linx!" one of the paparazzo called, "Who's your bride and is it

true she's connected to the notorious Demon's Bastards motorcycle gang?"

He rolled his eyes and pulled Trista closer to him. "Listen, guys, I know you have to do your job but please give my new wife and I some semblance of privacy. Her name is Trista Lennon-Carter, she's *legal* and her parents are deceased along with her older brother. She is the daughter of two accountants and there is nothing unsavory about her past what so ever. Now if you'll excuse us, please let us have our space."

Miraculously, the paparazzi

actually parted and allowed them to walk to their limo, but it didn't stop them from taking photos along the way.

As soon as they got into the limo, the driver sped away and Trista stared at him with a wry smile on her face. "Well, so much for surprising Talia with the news."

"Turn your cell phone off. It's what I did. I don't want to talk to anyone."

"How did they find out so fast anyway?"

Trinity cleared her throat. "Travis isn't dumb. He probably

heard me on the phone with Kelly and looking for a quick payday, he probably went trolling. He knows this scumbag who gives money for celebrity tips. I should have known better than to talk inside.”

The more Linx heard about this Travis guy, the more angry he became. He couldn't stand the thought of a man treating his sister like common trash.

“Trinity, we're leaving on Sunday. Can you get Kiki, a few sentimental pieces of jewelry or clothing and get the hell out of here?”

Trinity glanced at her brother

before she looked away “What about my job? I work for one of the best tattoo parlors here in Vegas—”

“Nil and Loire own The Black Rose. They’ll take you on in a heartbeat as long as you aren’t into anything...heavy. They are both recovering addicts so they don’t like drugs around the place—”

“Kelly and I smoke the occasional joint but that’s about it. I haven’t fucked Travis in six months because he has fallen into meth, Linx. I know what drugs do...I don’t do ‘em. I drink, of course, but never falling down style, plus...most of the time when I drink, I stay over at

Kelly's. A new law just went into effect that even if you're only buzzed when you drive, you will be arrested, your license gets suspended and you'll go to jail. I can't afford for that to happen in my profession."

"You've got two days to get your shit together. I would suggest you take Kelly with you. Grab your stuff and stay at her house until we leave on Sunday. Tell Travis it's a family emergency, but I'm not leaving you here with some meth addict."

His sister finally nodded. "Okay."

The limo pulled up to the hotel and again, a news crew plus various

paparazzi were there, stopped at a certain point by hotel security. Linx and Trista got out and were able to stroll safely, and untouched, into the hotel. This time, he didn't bother answering questions. His only concern was getting his bride upstairs and into their bed.



LINX CRACKED OPEN a bottle of Cristal champagne, courtesy of the hotel, and poured them each a glass of the sparkling bubbly.

He carried the bottle under his arm into the bedroom, the two glasses held in each hand. Trista sat

on the bed looking down at her phone. When she looked up at him, her blue eyes were wide, but unreadable.

Linx's eyebrows furrowed. "What's the matter, babe? You look like you've seen a ghost."

"My brother." She rolled her eyes. "Apparently we made some entertainment show and they talked about how we got married. They spoke of you as if you were a pedophile for marrying a 'barely-legal' young woman, their words, not mine. I've dated a fucking gang member and all the sudden, I'm some innocent due to my age? The

fucking press—I swear to God they never get anything right.”

“Well since I have seen you down alcohol like it was going out of style, here you go, my barely-legal, mail-order bride,” Linx joked as he handed her one of the fluted champagne glasses.

She accepted it and downed it before he could manage a swig on his.

“Pretty good. What is it? Cristal?”

“Yeah, how’d you know?”

“Trey bought me a bottle as a graduation present from high school last spring. I think I finished it on

my own and had several chasers of whiskey afterwards. I ended up puking in the back of the clubhouse while Clooney was trying to cop a feel.” She rolled her eyes at the thought. “It was all so *very* romantic...*not!*”

“Well, I certainly don’t want you puking. We haven’t eaten anything in ages and the booze is gonna go straight to your head.”

“That’s the best part,” she whispered, as she stood and stepped toward him. “Didn’t you say something about peeling this dress off of me when we got back to our suite?”

“Yeah, I did,” Linx murmured in a soft voice.

“Good because I need you in the worst way and we’re married so your honor to me is legal...Now get to it! I’m waiting, big boy.”

He grabbed her by the waist and pulled her to him. She was so soft and fragile. Why was he suddenly scared he would hurt her? She talked a good game but behind those eyes, there was so much pain.

“Thank you.”

Her lips, still painted red, parted as she asked, “For what?”

Linx gave her a long stare, trying

to show her with his eyes everything he felt before he spoke two words. "Saving me."

"From what or shall I say *who*?"

"Myself," he replied as he kissed her lips and she melted in his arms, a small moan grazing past those perfect lips.

Chapter Seventeen

THE TWO WORDS that Linx had uttered before he kissed me kept repeating itself like a broken record in my head.

Didn't he know he was the one who had saved me?

I realized what we felt for each other was way past the lust stage; otherwise, we would have jumped each other's bones within a week of

meeting. He couldn't casually sleep with me, but he hadn't told me he loved me.

I hadn't said it either because that wasn't me. I wasn't sure if I was even capable of feeling love for another person after losing my family, but obviously I could feel *something* because the man who held me in his arms also owned my heart at that moment.

It couldn't have been possible, could it? I didn't believe in insta-love and no way did two people fall in love within two months of knowing each other, right? It had been *less* than two months, but I

didn't just like him either.

Linx didn't act like the average rock star; he wasn't some asshole douchebag who had to fuck the hottest woman on two legs. I'd never seen him *look* at another woman when we were together. Was he truly that into me?

I hoped so—I was too close to the flame and I was burning. It hurt so much that my heart did flip flops in my chest along with my stomach. I didn't want to feel anything for him; it was easier that way, because he was my ticket out of the life I hated. If I fell in love then he could hurt me. I'd sworn no one would

ever hurt me again, not after what I'd been through.

Clooney's break up was a pin prick in comparison to my family's demise. I couldn't go through with that again. I refused to feel so much for someone that my heart could be crushed like that a second time. I had barely survived the first one and no way could I experience it again; I would self-destruct. I knew it. Trey knew it. Talia knew it too.

It was a Lennon tradition after all.

"Where are you, baby?" Linx wondered out loud. "You're right in front of me, but a million miles

away. You sure as fuck aren't here in this room with me."

"Tell me you don't love me," I begged, as the tears began to flow down my cheeks. "Tell me you married me because you just wanted to get rid of that bitch ex-wife of yours. Tell me this is all a scam and you just wanted to fuck me. Please, convince me that *none* of this is *real*."

"What?" Linx backed away from me, his blue eyes blazing. "Why would I do this for any of those reasons? I *do* love you...I don't know when it happened...maybe it was that first night when I held your

hands while you were getting your first tattoo. I take marriage very fucking seriously. I wanted you to be mine and now you are. But I'm also *yours* too. It works both ways, Trista. Are you saying you feel nothing for me?"

I collapsed on the floor, my tears falling staining the fabric of my dress. "I feel too much for you, Linx, and it's killing me. I couldn't take it if one day you decided to leave. Or what if *you* were murdered the way my parents were and...if it was my fault? Without you, I can't breathe, I can't function. I just...I need you in my life. If this isn't *real* then maybe I

can put everything in perspective. I have to be separate from people to be able to live because no one is around forever...no *one*.”

He walked over and sank to the floor in front of me, lifting my head, forcing me to face him. “I’m not going anywhere, babe. I will be here for you and I promise I won’t ever leave you and I will do my very best *never* to break your heart. You don’t have to worry about anyone hurting you by hurting *me*. I want you to be happy. I genuinely want to see a smile on your face and know that you are alive, that you aren’t doped up on Xanax and Macallan. That’s

no way to live, baby. Your parents wouldn't want that...Talía hates it... and I sure as hell don't want it either."

I inhaled and exhaled through my mouth before reaching out for his hand. He took it, pulling me to him as he reached out for my body. I finally kissed him and meant it. In that moment, I felt the world around me turn from a dulled out black and white to Technicolor. When his tongue swirled around mine, I wrapped my arms around his neck and he picked me up off the floor as if I weighed nothing.

We collapsed onto the bed. He

did as he promised; he stripped my dress from my body. I wore the tiniest La Perla black thong and matching bra.

Linx slid the thong off and spread my legs. I stopped him with a hand as I ripped his white silk shirt. Buttons popped as I exposed his chest and sat on my hunches to trace my hands along his roses tattoo. I surprised him with my sudden movements and laid him on the bed before I straddled him.

He quickly sat up, and matched my movements, flipping us so he was above me. Our lips met briefly before his lips left a trail down my

neck and he finally unhooked my bra to expose my breasts. His mouth tackled the left nipple, sucking hard as I fumbled to unzip his expensive pants and caressed his rock hard cock.

It felt strange to actually have that thick, lengthy male piece of him within my grasp. How long had I waited for this moment to happen between us? Way too fucking long and I couldn't wait to have every inch of him inside me, moving with me and making me truly belong to him.

Linx kissed his way down my body before he spread my legs and

his tongue flicked over my hardened clit. I gasped loudly as his hot mouth closed over the sensitive nub, suckling so hard that it was almost painful while he inserted his fingers inside me, moving them in and out. He'd found that spongy tissue I'd always heard about but had never experienced an orgasm from.

His blue eyes never left mine as he continued to caress my G-spot and I was forced to close my eyes, the feeling was pleasure overload. I didn't know if I was going to scream or cry as he continued to lick and tease my clit, his mouth determined, while his fingers working that spot

over and over. Just as the pressure became almost too much, he stopped and rose up onto his knees. He unfastened his pants and I helped to push them off with my legs before I wrapped them around his waist.

He guided his cock inside me and the first thrust from him brought tears to my eyes. I could feel my muscles stretching to accommodate both his length and girth as he stilled inside of me. We lay there like that, without words or a sound other than our breathing being exchanged between us.

I didn't exactly know how to

react; I had never been with a man like this, bare-back without a condom, yet there were so many thoughts running through my head. The physical sensation was so powerful it was consuming every inch of my body causing my hips to rock on their own. He began making love to me, his thrusts smooth and gentle inside me, teasing my very core while I held on to his neck for dear life; I couldn't describe how he made me feel.

One word kept repeating in my head over and over again: complete.

Linx flipped us over so that I was on top. I sat up, pushing my hands

against his tattooed chest and as I began to buck my hips, he followed my lead, matching his rhythm to meet mine; we quickly found a perfect tandem with one another. He felt so delicious and as he reached between our bodies with his hand, stroking his thumb along my clit in time to our movements, I couldn't hold back.

I gave my all, everything I wouldn't—couldn't—say in words I told him with my body. I allowed him to own all of me with his body, and as an orgasm seized me, he grabbed a hold of my ass with both hands. He brought me down closer

to him until I could feel my vaginal muscles squeezing, pulsating around his hardness and he groaned, his eyes rolling back into his head. I could feel him coming, his grip turning just this side of painful. His dick becoming an instrument of its own as he continued to pump inside me, emptying his load into my depths until there was nothing left but this, *us*, pressed against one another, panting together with harsh breaths. To be honest, I didn't want him move, even when I felt him grow soft and he slipped out of me. I felt empty without him inside of me, even as he pulled me into an

embrace and we lay back down on the bed.

I tried to stay in the moment for as long as I could, but worries began to bombard me. I wasn't on the pill and he hadn't used anything, not even a spermicide lubricant. What if I became pregnant? I so wasn't ready for babies. Yes, we were a married couple but I was still too young and I didn't want to look after anyone but myself.

Linx already had two kids and although I was a step-mother by proxy, Cassidy had full custody—he only had visitation every other weekend. He gave her enough

money to employ a nanny full time and would probably do the same for us if it *did* happen, but that wasn't the issue. I didn't want to be a mother, not yet, not after losing my own so recently.

“Babe, what's wrong? Did I hurt you?” Linx inquired, his deep voice inches away from my ear.

I placed my hands on his own where they held me by my waist and took a deep breath in slowly before I exhaled. “I'm not on anything—birth control, I mean. What happens if I get pregnant?”

“Well, we are married so it would be a perfectly normal issue that

might come up.”

“Seriously, I was supposed to be at Stanford University studying Business. Is this a joke to you? I’m not exactly ready to be changing diapers yet.”

“Honey, will you relax and live in the moment? Just trust me—it isn’t something you have to worry about. I promise you.”

I slipped out of his embrace and went to the bathroom where I hoped to God most of his semen was coming out with the emptying of my bladder.

How could he be so fucking blasé

about this? I didn't want a messed up kid with some awful issue that came along just because I couldn't deal with my addiction to Xanax at the moment.

I wiped myself, flushed the toilet and walked to the sink where I studied my reflection in the vanity mirror. Was I really strong enough to admit I had an addiction problem and needed help? I was up to four milligrams of Xanax per day and though my doctor assured me there was nothing wrong with my dosage or usage, I wasn't taking them because of anxiety attacks anymore. I took them simply because they

made me feel numb and I could walk through life not giving a shit and no one was affected.

Not anymore. Now I had responsibilities, a husband—I couldn't afford to be that selfish. What was I really going to do? I knew I couldn't quit cold turkey. Like an idiot, about a month after I started living with Talia, in a rare moment of clarity, I flushed my supply down the toilet and experienced two of the most hellish days of my life.

Sweating, anxiety attacks rolled over me in waves and I had a headache so bad, my brain felt like

it'd been split open. Talia had a supply but she no longer took them since she was pregnant. Even then, her doctor had eased her off them slowly, taking her down to the lowest dosage and when she ran out, she'd felt all right.. She might have been woozy the first couple of days but it was nothing like my reaction.

She'd made an emergency appointment for me to see her general practitioner and Dr. Berger had given me a six month supply of my usual two milligram tablets and sent me on my way.

Thinking about the Xanax, I thought about the extra pill bottle I

kept in my purse and walked back into the bedroom. Linx's eyes were closed as I tip-toed to my purse. I reached in for a two milligram tablet, snapped it in half, and downed the pill with what was left of the Cristal champagne.

I slipped on my robe and sat in the living room, staring at my phone for a long time. There were missed calls and texts.

It was inevitable. Those calls and text messages would have to be returned. I had to stop running and face up to my responsibilities, no matter how much the urge to hide from the world comforted me like a

warm blanket. That wasn't me and I would never allow myself to be that person again.

It was late and I truly wondered if anyone would be up at this time of the night. Before I could actually dial a number, my phone lit up with "Diamonds" by Rihanna, Talia's personalized ring tone, and I answered with a quick and soft, "Hello?"

"Listen, I don't want to get into this over the phone. Dominic just flew Sasha and I out to meet with you two tomorrow. We're staying over at my girlfriend's house in Summerlin, so I will text you

directions. Be prepared to meet us at one o'clock. Is that clear?"

"Of course. We'll meet you there. How is Jerrica and the baby by the way?"

"They're both doing well. She gave birth almost three months ago. Jared was a few weeks premature but he's strong and healthy now. So is she." Talia paused before she continued, "Listen, neither one of you are in trouble if that's what you're thinking. You are both legal and free to make any decisions you want about your personal life. Sasha is here as PR for the group and she merely wants a statement from the

two of you she can give to the press, that's all."

I breathed a quiet sigh of relief. "I thought you were mad at me—"

"—I am! I'm mad as hell that I didn't get to see my cousin walk down the aisle and probably had to use two tired employees as witnesses to her freakin' marriage."

"It wasn't like that. Trinity is staying out here now and we used her and her friend, Kelly, as witnesses. It was a wonderful experience and I don't regret it...but it would have been nice to have more friends and family. I just thought no one, especially you,

would want to see us go through with it and that hurt my heart, Tal.”

“Well, now that we have cleared that up, I’ll see you tomorrow. Enjoy the rest of your night. Love you.”

“I will. Night and love you too.” I smiled as I ended the call and set my phone on the coffee table.

For the first time since the deaths of Tristan and my parents, I could glimpse happiness and it was truly a wonderful feeling to grasp. Maybe I wasn’t destined to spend the rest of my life hopelessly depressed and confused after all.

Chapter Eighteen

LINX AWOKES TO find his beautiful bride curled in his arms. Kissing her softly on the forehead, he got out of bed and walked directly to the bathroom.

As he began the shower, it immediately occurred to him that he was actually married and the thought brought a smile to his lips.

Despite his hardcore rocker

appearance and “don’t give a damn” attitude he wore, he was really the “settling down” type. He couldn’t help the way his brain was hard-wired and while Trista’s immediate response was to question if it was real, his only thought had been that he’d never been in a relationship that felt more open, honest and sincere.

Cassidy’s main purpose in life had been to get Linx to put a ring on her finger, one that he’d fought for a long time. Yeah, their sex life had been smokin’ but other than a shared upbringing in Boston, they had zero in common. She liked to go

out to various clubs and bars with her friends, get drunk, high, and then run home to have mad, kinky passionate sex with him. He was more of a homebody type who, after hanging out with the band when they were just getting started, liked to indulge in either action-adventure, drama, horror or even the occasional chick-flick film while drinking a Heineken on the couch.

Someone like Cassidy always managed to meet the wrong people and in L.A., it wasn't any different. She got high on coke, crystal meth, marijuana; she drank like a fish and partied like a rock star. Her whole

crowd was into that and it was no surprise when her best friend, Tiffany, moved out to L.A. Tiffany had reunited with her on-again/off-again boyfriend from Boston, Niko, and everything else—including the tacky wedding and the nasty divorce—was history.

Even when he and Cassidy married, she didn't change her ways. When Winter's Regret became famous, she was tabloid fodder for *In Touch*, *Society Magazine*, *US Weekly* and *The Daily Mail* for stumbling out of clubs with friends or being caught shit faced with smeared makeup. Her biggest mistake, and the reason

for their break-up, was sleeping with Seth shortly after she found out she was pregnant with Jimi. Linx could forgive a lot of things, but fucking one of his best friends while she was expecting his child wasn't one of them.

He'd never told anyone, not even Niko, the real reason behind their divorce. He'd publicly blamed it on the partying and his own infidelity, which he knew would get him caught by the media. Although he allowed her to file his brother slash attorney found out the truth and used it to their advantage.

Most ex-wives married to

successful rock stars got really nice alimony checks. Cassidy wasn't the sharpest tool in the shed and didn't realize her amount was considered paltry in comparison.

Yes, she got to keep the house and lived mortgage free; he also paid for the Nanny and the utilities as well, but as far as he was concerned, she was still a drain on his finances.

Linx finished up his shower, dried off and entered the bedroom to find Trista up and about. She paced as she spoke on the phone with someone.

"Listen, I can't talk about this now and it's not my fault! Don't you

dare blame me for the WKs coming after you, Trey. You were the one who started in on the rampage and went all *Natural Born Killers* on their ass, so you clean up your own goddamn mess.”

She stopped pacing once she looked in Linx’s direction and listened to her brother on the other end before she scoffed loudly.

“What?! You want me to lend you money from my trust account? Absolutely not! You’re a fucking Bastard—let your club *protect* you. If anyone is at fault for the deaths in our family, it’s your sorry ass for getting involved in a gang. You

knew they were doing something illegal and could get people killed. But no, you wanted to be a bad ass —”

Linx listened to Trista, as her brother said something to her. She rolled her eyes and shook her head.

“I can’t do this, not today, Trey. I already have to meet with Talia and Sasha in Summerlin. I can’t come by to see you—”

He began to dress in a pair of tight, yet slightly baggy, black jeans and a blue flannel, short-sleeved shirt. It wasn’t the most original of outfits, but it would do for today. He knew they would need to keep a low

profile, especially if they were meeting with Trista's brother. He was pretty sure that would probably happen now that she was screaming like a banshee at him over the phone.

“If you're so fuckin' broke then how can you afford to stay at Caesars Palace? Sometimes I'm ashamed to call you my brother.” Trista ended the call, threw the phone on the bed, and strolled to Linx, wrapping her arms around his waist.

“What's going on, babe?”

She was fighting back tears in those gorgeous blue eyes of hers and

swallowed hard. “Trey shot Brooklyn Decker. He’s at Carson Tahoe Medical Center in Carson City suffering from a collapsed lung. There isn’t a warrant out for Trey’s arrest yet, only because the patient is doped up on pain medication, unconscious and can’t speak to the cops.

“As soon as it happened, he high-tailed it out of there and drove all night on his Harley to get here, because like everyone else, he knows about our marriage.”

“Wait a minute...we left him in L.A. last night.”

“They left for Nevada as soon as I

stood him up at Talia's. The shooting went down sometime this morning...around three-thirty or so. He drove here directly from Carson City and got here a couple hours ago; he checked in at Caesars Palace. Now he calls me, claiming he's broke, and doesn't know what to do because when he gets found out, all hell is going to break loose."

"How much did he ask for and where does he think he's going to go?"

"We have a charter in Vancouver. I assume he's just going to stay up there until the heat dies down."

“Washington state? Or Canada?”

“Canada.”

Linx wrapped his arms around her neck and pulled her closer to him. “Oh, and what’s this about a meeting with Talia and Sasha? Our financial manager lives in Summerlin but I do know his wife and Talia are best friends. Why are we meeting at his house? What does he have to do with us getting married?”

“Nothing, to be honest. You don’t have to speak to Paul about anything unless you need to change your life insurance policies or anything else financially related.

We're meeting Tal and Sash there because they stayed at their house last night. Sasha wants a statement from us so she can report it to the media to get them off our backs.

“Talía always stays with Jerrica because they both went to Vassar together. She avoids the Strip at all costs and I highly doubt she wants the paparazzi getting wind she's briefly in town. Plus, I don't think she likes hotels much anymore. The six month tour soured her opinion of them and she would rather stay with friends than in some anonymous yet luxurious suite.”

“How do you know so much

about her relationship with Jerrica?”

Trista stared at him intensely before she arched one of her perfect brows. “She’s my cousin. They both went through some real bad shit together when they were in college. She never confided in me what it was but it’s scarred her for life and she’s still messed up after all this time.

“There’s not much I don’t know about her but that was one aspect of her life she’s always been really closed off about. Other than that, I know Tal was a songwriter for Introspect Records before Seth offered her a job as a keyboardist in

your band and told her she could sing back up—”

“Yeah, I know, I was at that meeting when he offered her the job,” Linx interrupted softly before he sighed out loud. “I have to admit at the time I was completely against it. That is, until she saved our asses on tour. Without her, I don’t know what we would have done. I love her to death now and know she has resurrected the band.”

“Well, she’s got three best girlfriends from college. Autumn, who travels between L.A. and New York; Savannah, who lives in New York; and Jerrica, who’s married to

Paul and lives here in Vegas. They moved from New York late last August if I'm not mistaken. She wouldn't dare come all this way and not spend time with Jerrica. Of her three best friends, she and Jerrica have always been the closest. Now you know why even if neither of us are aware of the specifics."

Linx sighed, kissed her brow, and looked her in the eyes. "So, what are we going to do about your brother's situation?"

Trista stepped back and broke their intimate embrace. "That, dear husband, will have to wait until after I take a shower. I don't want to

talk about him until I am squeaky clean and dressed. Just thinking about his issues make me feel dirty.”

“That’s a bit harsh, don’t you think?”

“I can’t get harsh *enough* where Trey is concerned.” She ran a hand through her hair. “He always has a way of showing up when I can’t deal with him. Right now is really bad timing on his part and I hate he’s involved us with whatever shit he’s gotten himself into because ignorance is bliss. I would rather *not* know what he was up to because he makes us both accessories to his crimes after the fact. Trey knows the

law and still does crap like this anyway...just because he *can*.”

Linx watched her walk into the bathroom and tried to understand his feelings for his new wife. He knew he loved her and wanted to protect her, keep her safe, regardless of any cost. If her brother was bullying her over money, he would go to the bank and get the cash. It meant nothing to him, but Trista's peace of mind was everything and that's all he wanted for her.

If anyone deserved to be happy, it was his beautiful, damaged bride, who still seemed to wear the weight of the world on her shoulders like a

fucking scarlet letter.



LINX LAUGHED AGAIN at one Paul's jokes, before he decided that the band had one of the coolest financial advisors in the world. Paul took care of not only the band's financial interests but also their personal ones as well. Trista had reminded him of something very important and he spoke to Paul about it: updating his life insurance policies.

All of Linx's money and possessions would now be split three ways with his boys each

inheriting a third and Trista would get the rest. He signed a stack of revised paperwork before they joined the women back in the sitting room.

He'd also decided that they had the most perfect family. He and his wife, Jerrica, had two sons, both under the age of two, and they were content, carefree and their life was a tranquility of love and happiness.

It was something Linx had always desired from Cassidy but she wasn't wife material, not like a college-educated woman like Jerrica, who balanced work and family with ease. Of course, she also had a live-

in nanny from Belgium who helped her out, though she took care of her children as well. The nanny was there for help, not to be a substitute mother.

He wished Brady and Jimi had the same, but Cassidy used them like an ATM machine and perhaps that's all they were to her. The two, toe-haired, blue-eyed boys were merely a nuisance in her life that the "Nanny" would handle. She spent very little time with the children, and they relied more on Hanna, the German nanny, than they did on their own mother.

"Hey, Space Cadet," Talia

snapped her fingers in front of his face, forcing himself to stop contemplating about his overly complicated life.

“Yeah?” He looked at her, smirking. “Sorry, I just took a vacation in my own head for a sec.”

“No problem with that, but can we talk outside for a minute?”

Linx stood and followed Talia out to the back yard. It was classic desert landscaping with a swimming pool, hot tub and also a professional barbeque pit. He sat down on one of the comfortable, cream lounge chairs in the shade. The sun wasn't strong but he was glad for the

reprieve.

“You want something to drink?” Talia asked him as she grabbed a Heineken and an Evian.

“Sure, thanks. How did you know they keep a mini refrigerator out here?” He hated that he’d asked the question as soon as it left his lips.

“Jerrica is my best friend and I have been here a few times since we’ve been back from tour.” She sat down on the lounge next to him and caressed her baby bump. “Gah, he kicks something wicked. I can’t believe Jaden’s mother had so many kids, if he was as bad as this one is now. I think this is my first and last

baby.”

Linx swigged from his Heineken. “How has he been? Still battling it out with Faith?”

Talia rolled her pale green eyes and glared at him with annoyance. “What makes you think I want to talk about that fucking cunt? I can’t stand her and she’s just using the history they have together while she still gets high. The bitch is toxic and I’ve already told Jaden that if he chooses to stay with her, he won’t have access to his kid unless he comes by alone to see him. I don’t want my baby anywhere near that junkie whore.”

“Whoa. Sorry, I didn’t mean to pry.”

“Yeah, well you did and I hope I satisfied your curiosity.” She sipped from her water and placed the bottle on the small circular glass table that separated the two loungers. “I didn’t come out here to talk about my personal drama, Linx. You married my cousin and that’s cool with me, even though she’s only eighteen. I know a lot of people will judge you for that—I don’t because Trista isn’t your normal eighteen year old. She doesn’t care about hanging out at the mall and gossiping with girlfriends. I don’t think she’s had

many girls as friends other than her brother's girlfriends."

"I won't hurt her, Talia." He swigged from his beer bottle again. "I know what you are going to say because she asked me last night. I couldn't, in good conscience, sleep with her and *not* be married to her. There is just this...fragility about her, like she's a wounded butterfly. All I want to do is keep her safe."

"I know how you feel about Trista, Linx. I saw it the first time you two met. It didn't surprise me that you two got together, but I was shocked the way you went about it. Marriage, Linx? I love Trista—don't

get me wrong—but she’s fucked in the head, and not in a good way. She’s got emotional issues coming out of her eyeballs and she isn’t ready to love anyone; she can’t even properly love herself.”

Linx’s heart pounded in his chest as he gazed into Talia’s eyes. “What are you trying to say, Tal? That my wife is some kind of psycho bitch out of *Single White Female*? You think I don’t know she has issues? I know, because I have been with her nearly every day for almost two months. I know she’s been severely fucked up by the death of her parents and Tristan.”

“It’s not just that. The shit she’s seen. Yeah, she’s strong—I’ll give her that—but there is only so much a person can deal with before they snap. Trey was her world and when he joined the Demon’s Bastards, she followed him around like a lost puppy. She’s been around murder and mayhem her whole life, Linx. Her parents and Tristan...they aren’t the first time she’s dealt with death, though it is the first time she’s been this close to it.”

Talia seemed to size him up before she bit her lip. “I got a friendly visit from the FBI just about an hour after Trey left last night.

They asked me really strange questions and their first question was about Trista's whereabouts. I told them I didn't know, because I really didn't at that time and I wasn't going to lie. I don't know what they want with Trista, but they seemed a bit too eager to speak to her."

"What are you trying to say, Talia? My wife is wanted as a criminal?"

"It's doubtful. I said she's been around violence almost her whole life, but she's never killed anyone... at least, not that I'm aware of. I think they probably want to talk to

her about Trey or her parents' death, but they aren't going to get anything out of her. She wouldn't rat out the Bastards. No way would she let her brother do anymore time."

"Trey's has been to jail?"

"Try the Northern Nevada Correctional Center—are you sure you're a rock star? You're terribly naïve to be one." Talia stood and looked down at him. "He's a convicted felon and spent six months of a two year sentence inside. That was when he was twenty-one—he's your age now, so if he takes a swing at you for

marrying his baby sister, don't be too surprised. He's always been extremely protective of her."

"Shit...we're supposed to meet him after we finish up here." Linx stood as well and sighed. "What's the point of this speech you're giving me? I get it; Trista has issues, and I will give her the space she needs to work out her problems. I'll pay for counseling if she needs it, or wants it. Money isn't an issue. I entered this whole arrangement with my eyes wide fucking open. It doesn't change how I feel about her or why I love her."

"And why *do* you love her?" Talia

placed one hand on her baby bump, while the other caressed her lower back. “The question isn’t rhetorical, Linx. I seriously want to know what you see in an eighteen year old, damaged woman, who is far older in her years, mentally, than she should be. Don’t be fooled by those baby blues—they have probably seen more horrible shit go down than you when you lived in South Boston.”

“Why do you love Jaden? The guy is a major prick and he’s just stringing you along.” Linx bit his tongue before he said anything else that would hurt Talia. “I fell in love

with your cousin after we actually became friends. We're able to talk about everything. She told me about the death of her parents and brother...how Trey was in the Bastards MC and how much she saw and went through as a teenager.

“And for the record, I do know whether she murdered someone, and the answer is no but...a prospect tried to rape her when she was fifteen; Trey shot him in the head right in front of her. And just so you don't have any doubts about my lack of knowledge, I knew he was dangerous. I've seen plenty of violence go down in South Boston

including people shot in front of me; like those men were never caught, I just *assumed* he was too crafty to actually be caught for any of his nefarious activities.”

“So, her opening herself up to you, showing you her true self, the ugly side of her, made you fall in love with her?”

“Yes,” Linx replied. “We didn’t have the complication of sex. All we had was our conversations, booze, and a joint every now and then. I didn’t have to fuck her to know I loved her. She was more naked and vulnerable with me when we talked than she was last night when we

made love for the first time. We didn't even fool around before. Yes, I'm truly am a man: I love sex as much as the next but...it was never about that. Does it help that I think Trista is hot as hell? Fuck yeah, but that's not all she is. Hell, her looks aren't even a *tenth* of the reason why I fell for her.

“She never treated me like anything but a friend. She never acted star-struck and the fact that she's spent so much time around men comes out loud and clear. She was never scared or quiet around me and she never threw herself at me. She treated me like I could have

been a chick, only with a dick. We talked a lot and I told her... everything...about me. She's even met my boys. They love her and she loves them."

Linx looked over Talia's shoulder and watched as Trista walked outside to join them.

Talia looked down at her growing belly. "I suppose that's why I fell in love with Jaden, then. I saw him at his worst, most ugly and I thought: if I can accept this, then I can deal with anything. It was the opposite with Seth. I only saw the beauty and when the ugly emerged, I couldn't handle it. I began to hate

him. Funny, how love can turn into hate.”

Trista cleared her throat. “Tal, we’ve gotta go. Linx and I have to meet up with Trey. He needs money and apparently now that I am married to Linx, well, he thinks I am Mrs. Moneybags.”

“How much does he want? I gave him ten thousand last night...in cash. That’s the only way I could get him and that annoying Clooney to leave. I can’t believe you let that fuckwad put his dick inside you.”

“He wore a condom every time we did it...and it was something to do at the time. Isn’t that how

relationships usually go?” Trista rolled her eyes, obviously annoyed.

“Come on, we better get a move on.”

Linx helped Talia back inside before he and Trista took off. He was already exhausted and the day was only half way over.

Chapter Nineteen

IF I HADN'T already been in love with Linx before that day, I was by the end of it.

He knew how much I didn't want to see Trey, but he drove to Caesars Palace and we took full advantage of their valet service. We found the douchebag out by the pool, in a private cabana. Keri was with him and smoked a cigarette lazily as we

entered.

“Hey, sis.” Trey sat up, lighting a Marlboro as well.

There were several empty glasses; it was obvious they’d both been downing cocktails for a while.

“How’d you get here so quickly?” I questioned Keri, as she hung all over him like a cheap suit.

“I flew out last night when he told me to meet him here. I’m the one who charged the suite. By the way, I need that money back.”

I glanced at her with cool, emotionless eyes. “What the fuck do I look like? Bank of America? Wells,

fucking, Fargo? Ask Trey to reimburse you—he scored money off our cousin last night and now you’re asking *me* for money. What do you need it for?”

“There’s no guarantee Brooklyn is gonna make it and I’m not sticking around here to face a murder charge. Keri and I are going to Ireland. You know Grandma and Granddad live over there now? Outside of Omagh.”

“How are you getting there? You’re a convicted felon, Trey.”

Trey grabbed what looked like an Adios Motherfucker and swigged from the glass. “Not anymore, and I

am not becoming one any time soon either. My parole ended after the two years I was supposed to serve. I have both my U.S. and Irish passports. I got them as soon as I could. Keri and I are leaving tonight.”

Linx stepped forward. “I’ll give you the money.”

I stared at him but he refused to look at me.

My brother’s hazel-green eyes brightened. “Cool, man. I knew a smart guy like you wasn’t strapped for cash.”

“I also have an Irish passport. My

parents are first-generation Americans; all four of my grandparents were born in Northern Ireland. It certainly doesn't hurt that I'm famous so I am considered quite special by the Irish government. If you fuck up, or do anything else to embarrass your sister, I *will* fly over to Ireland and kick your ass myself."

Trey laughed out loud. "Dude, I knew it was gonna be awesome to have you as a brother-in-law. I got mad respect for anyone who can step up and say something like that to me. Trista tell you about the last man who tried to take something from her she didn't wanna give?"

I felt like I was watching a tennis match. Linx's whole body stance had changed and he was definitely in fight mode. It must have been a South Boston thing; he was completely serious and he didn't flinch. This wasn't a side I'd ever seen from him, but I knew right then and there that if he hadn't become a musician, he would have ended up a carbon copy of Trey.

"Yeah, she did. Kind of hard to get away with firing a nine millimeter in a hotel pool area filled with tourists and witnesses, though. You're already in trouble for shooting Brooklyn Decker. Don't

force me to do something stupid like call the cops and tell them what I know—”

“You wouldn’t dare, rock star. Do you *really* want the world to know your teenage bride is the sister of a notorious motorcycle club member, or that I am a former felon? I didn’t think so.”

“So, you’re cool with me and Trista? You’re not gonna put a hit out on me?”

“No. As long as Trista is happy, it’s all good. You’d better keep it that way though, because the moment I see tears in her eyes, and they’re caused by you, you’re *fucking* dead.”

I rolled my eyes, sick of my brother's bravado. "Seriously, Trey, if you don't quit with all the threats then neither of us are going to give you a dime."

"Hey, that's so not cool," Keri responded, her tone carrying a slight slur. "You know why we need that money."

"And what—besides a freshly licked lesbo pussy—are you adding to this 'Getaway fund'?" I snapped back.

She didn't blush but she did stand in six-inch, hooker mules and walked away in the tiny bikini she wore.

“Why are you always throwing her job in her face? She’d be strictly dicky if it wasn’t for me, but no way am I going to have some guy bangin’ my girl, on or off film.”

“But her eating pussy, and being eaten out on film, is perfectly acceptable.” I shook my head sadly. “Mom and Dad would turn over in their graves if they saw how low you have sunk. I thought she was just some skank on the side that you were screwing. I had no idea you planned to embarrass our family name by making an ‘honest’ woman out of her and giving that *slut* our last name!”

“Hey! Whatever you think of Keri, she’s stuck by me through thick and thin for over three years, Trista. You don’t think I’ve cheated on her with every hot Demon scrubber that has come into the clubhouse? Or even when I am out on the road and I need a little action? She’s loyal and would never leave my side,” Trey explained, his voice calm.

Linx interrupted them, as he pulled his Galaxy Note out of his pocket and checked the screen. “Trista and I have a late lunch scheduled. I suppose you want the money in cash?”

“Actually, I have an account you can wire it to.” Trey grabbed a hotel pen and pad, which displayed the ostentatious Caesars Palace logo, and wrote it down. As he handed it to Linx, he said, “You can just send it there. It’s an account no one knows about, not even the club. It can’t be frozen by the government.”

“It’s twenty grand, Trey. The bank has to report it to the government. Are you sure they won’t freeze that account?”

“Positive. The account is in Switzerland and the money gets transferred out of the account and into yet another account. It’s a little

something I worked out myself. It hops three more accounts before it ends up in the Cayman Islands. It's a completely untraceable system; even I don't know the four intermittent accounts it goes through. The only accounts that are mine are the one in Switzerland and the one in the Caymans. I have been doing it for years and haven't been caught yet. Did you forget I was a whiz with computers?"

"How could I, when you never let me, Trey?"

Linx cleared his throat and grabbed my hand. "I'll make the transfer as soon as we get back to

our hotel suite. Take care and have a safe flight.”

I slipped my hand from his grasp and walked the short distance to Trey. No matter how much I wanted to hate him for being a fuck-up and possibly having something to do with our family’s death, I still loved him. I would always remember him as the one who protected me at all costs, even when it risked his freedom.

I had to let go all of the pain and the suffering and most of all, the blame. Deep down in my heart, I knew he’d loved our parents just as much as I did—even if something

he'd done caused their deaths, it wasn't intentional. He'd always tried to protect us and he was there for me when I had no one else to turn to. I couldn't allow him to leave for Ireland thinking I despised him or that I didn't care whether he lived or died, when that was the furthest thing from the truth.

Trey stood and I wrapped my arms around his neck, while his circled my waist, both of us holding on tight. "Take care of yourself, sis, and stop blaming yourself for Mom and Dad's death. Start living again, because that is the only way you will be able to make a life for yourself

and achieve real happiness.”

“You follow your advice to me,” I whispered to him as he held me against his chest. “It wasn’t your fault, so stop blaming yourself. Stop murdering and hurting people and try to start living again. As our parents’ only son who is still alive, make them proud. You are capable of so much greatness. Stop wallowing in mediocrity, Trey.”

“So are you. Or what, do you think Linx married you for your good looks?” We stared at each other, his hazel-green eyes intense. “He knows how intelligent you are and I know he can sense that part of

you that has yet to be discovered. When you truly allow yourself to love him and be loved back, you'll take your relationship to the next level. What you two have together is *real*. Don't let anyone—not even an occasional asshat and douchebag like me—ruin it for you, okay?”

I nodded silently as we let go, and I waved goodbye to him before Linx and I left the cabana together.



THERE WASN'T A late lunch planned, but we did have one in our suite's living room. We ordered room service and Linx rented *Fast &*

Furious 6 on pay-per-view. I settled next to him and we watched the action-packed film while enjoying various appetizers including marinated shrimp quesadilla, hummus with pita bread, and sweet-chili flame-grilled wings while drinking Heineken.

It was a perfect afternoon. After the movie ended, we lay in the other's arms and he kissed me, small, soft, lingering kisses against my brow, my cheeks, my chin, while one hand caressed my scalp. I found this oddly soothing; there was no rush and now that we were married, he knew he could have me

whenever he wanted me.

We were still reckless though, and for someone who feared getting pregnant, I sure didn't act like it when I sat in his lap, his hard-on an urgent, painful reminder of how sexy he found me and how much I turned him on.

I suppose I truly was eighteen—I kept thinking that 'next time' I would insist he use a condom until I got on the pill or was fitted for an IUD. We were just asking for trouble bare-backing, neither one of us using any form of protection and although I knew it, a part of me couldn't think past that moment

between us.

Linx cupped my face and kissed me long and hard, our tongues swirling together with a ferocious intensity. All I could focus on at that moment were his hands against my bare back as they roamed underneath my tee-shirt. He took off my shirt and threw it on the sofa before he devoured my neck with a hungry mouth. I could feel his breath at my pulse point as he licked and stroked the area with seductive fingertips.

“Are you okay with this?” He pulled away from my neck and stared into my eyes, his cornflower

blue eyes bright and magnetic.

“Of course. Do I look like a cock tease?” I kissed his neck and helped him out of his wife beater before he stood, holding his hand out toward me.

Instead of allowing him to help me up, I unsnapped the button of his jeans and slid the zipper down. The line of hair from his navel to his pubic area was such a turn on and, unlike a lot of guys, he kept himself nice and neat. He might have been covered in ink but my man was certainly *not* a slob when it came to personal hygiene.

I pressed my nose to his taught

stomach and inhaled the musky scent of him; amber, sage and a hint of lavender.

“What cologne do you use?” I asked as I kissed the heart tattoo on his stomach, caressing his chest with gentle hands.

“It’s Dior Homme. My mother bought me a bottle for Christmas about five years ago and I fell in love with it. Cassidy hated it but I still used it. I’m glad you like it.”

“My favorite fragrance is Midnight Poison by Dior, but the last time I was in France, my mother took me to a perfume shop and I had my own perfume made from a

mixture of different flowers; the main ingredients are vanilla and freesia. I love it so I use it more than the designer scents.”

Linx looked down at my face as I grabbed his hard-on. “It’s the first thing I noticed about you. How great you always smell. I am in love with your scent because it represents you.”

I didn’t feel much like conversation anymore; rather than reply to his statement, I licked the tip of his cock and his breath instantly grew ragged.

It wasn’t the first time I’d given a blow job, but it was the first I’d

actually wanted to do. I wanted to please him and as I wrapped my mouth around the head of him, he moaned through gritted teeth.

I was surprised when he didn't grab my head at all, but instead, tilted his head back. He grabbed my free hand and held on while my occupied hand continued to pleasure that male part of him along with my mouth.

There was will power and skill involved in taking a man deep into your mouth, and I knew all the great tricks because I had held Clooney off as long as possible with a lot of blow jobs.

My mouth drifted further down as I coaxed more of his thick, veined length past my teeth until the tip of his cock reached the back of my throat. I slowly pulled him out before taking his length all the way back in.

“Fuck, baby. What are you trying to do to me?” he whispered, his voice husky, as he withdrew from my mouth.

“Drive you wild with so much passion that you burst.” It was a cheesy line but he still smiled at me.

“My turn.” He got down on his knees and helped me out of my jeans.

They ended up on the sofa as he slipped my thong to the side and spread me open with his thumbs. I was already soaked, wet with desire and he played his tongue over my hard clit; it was my turn for ragged and heavy breathing.

Linx knew exactly what to do to please me; his tongue darting lower until it hovered at my opening and he plunged inside of me.

I almost came there on the spot because while he tongue fucked me, his thumb grazed softly over my clit, massaging it in slow, circular motions that had me feeling like any moment now, I would come

unglued.

And then just like that, he flipped me over, whispering, “Arch your ass in the air and grip the back of the sofa.”

I did as I was told; his mouth tackled my clit again while his fingers worked in and out of me, caressing that spongy tissue that was my G-spot and I moaned loudly. I was close, so very close to the edge of a waterfall and I knew that when I tumbled over, it would be an adrenaline-rush along with one of the strongest orgasms I’d ever experienced.

He withdrew his fingers and

gripped the firm orbs of my ass before he kissed the small of my back. I didn't know where to expect his touch next and the anticipation was killing me, thrilling me, turning me on even more. I needed him inside me but he continued to tease me with an expert tongue and skillful fingers. When his tongue reached my neck, I was panting at the feel of his body so close to mine. The heat coming off him seemed to surround me and I found myself trapped in a never-ending inferno of lust and desire.

I wiggled my ass against his dick and he laughed into my ear.

“Naughty girl...I didn't know you liked back door action.”

“I'll love it anyway you're going to give it to me,” I pleaded, surprising myself at the boldness of my statement.

His cock teased my anus. “Have you ever had a man screw you in the ass?”

“No.” I hung my head in shame. “My one and only boyfriend before you wanted to get freaky like that but, I just couldn't do it. I think that is something...too intimate and messy to share with just anyone.”

“The messy part is right but, rest

assured, I am a consummate teacher...however, I won't be doing that tonight."

"You won't?" I looked over my shoulder. "Wait a minute, you mean you have done it before?"

"Yes...with both women and men."

Was this the other shoe that had yet to be dropped?

"So, you're bisexual?"

"No. It was just something to do at the time, so I did it. I don't regret it, but I don't want to do anything sexual with anyone—male or female—except you."

Linx kissed my neck as he entered me and I gasped at the feel of him, so big and hard, sliding slowly inside me. I was soaking wet and he didn't have to work very hard before he was seated all the way inside me. I leaned against him and he managed to stay inside me while his fingers played with my nipples.

I turned my head slightly so his mouth could assault my own with a soul-stealing kiss that took my breath away. He continued to thrust in and out of me, his cock hitting that spongy tissue, and every time he did, it allowed me to move closer

and closer to the oncoming waterfall of ultimate pleasure.

He abruptly withdrew from my body, leaving me empty and needing him there, inside of me. It was no longer just a physical want or need but a psychologically feeling as well. When we were together, he made me feel whole and I never wanted that sensation to end.

Linx turned me around and placed me flat on the sofa. He moved between my spread legs before he threw my legs over his shoulders and thrust his cock inside of me again. I gasped as he kissed my legs and continued his strong,

slow thrusts, filling me completely.

I maneuvered my legs until they were wrapped around his waist and pulled him to me. He kissed me again while our sweaty bodies pressed together, rough and hard. Every time he moved inside of me, it brought me new pleasure and I moaned into his mouth.

My body was as ready as my mind and finally, I did it. I let go and freed myself of all the guilt, anger, shame and misery that I'd been carrying around with me like a cloak. The moment I did that, we truly connected, body to body, soul to soul. Although it was only

temporary and I knew all those feelings would eventually return, for that one moment, we were all that mattered.

My orgasm was, indeed, like that rush to a waterfall and I tumbled over, my eyes wide open. I stared into the eyes of my husband, the man I could truly say I loved, as I came and my vaginal muscles flexed, squeezing him before he began to come too.

The pleasure we'd mutually brought continued until we were both spent and freed of the emotional chains that had bound for so long to something that never

existed. We'd been our own worst enemies, wallowing in our mutual pits of misery and self-pity, but for that brief moment in time, I could read it in his eyes; he felt free too.

He withdrew from my body and instead of collapsing on top of me, he grasped my hands and clasped them within his own. I responded and squeezed his hands back with mine.

His full weight was pressed against my body and it felt delicious and solid.

I decided then and there that he would be the pillar of strength holding me up; and I would lean

against him until I could finally stand on my own.

Chapter Twenty

LINX SLEPT PEACEFULLY with Trista in his arms that night and although he knew they would be leaving for L.A. later that afternoon, he felt like a better, stronger person than he was when they'd left the city on Friday afternoon.

They awoke Sunday morning and made love yet again. He knew he should have told her by now, he

couldn't bring himself to tell her something that didn't matter—it could be reversed, but at the moment, it was better for everyone involved.

After Cassidy had sprung Jimi on him, he'd secretly gone to his general practitioner and scheduled a vasectomy. His could be reversed, but it prevented him from knocking up his ex-wife, or any other woman for the matter.

Trista deserved to know the truth: he was firing blanks, and no matter how many times they slept together unprotected, she wouldn't become pregnant. He planned to tell

her that afternoon before they went back to L.A.

Every time they had sex, he could see fear creep into her eyes, as if she was wondering whether this would be the time he would knock her up, even if it was just an accident.

They showered together and afterwards, dressed in the same bedroom in almost matching outfits. She wore a cute three quarter length peasant top in bright crimson and paired it with black skinny jeans and her favorite pair of black heels.

Unlike Cassidy, Trista had a body to die for. She had a wonderful

figure with just enough tits, thighs and ass. She wasn't some stick figure he thought he was going to break in half and he liked that about her.

No wonder Trey had guarded her with his life. Most men liked women who looked like her, not those anorexic types that couldn't enjoy a meal. It was quite boring to watch a woman eat rabbit food because she was scared of gaining weight.

"Hey, what do you want for breakfast?" Linx asked as finished the wire transfer he'd promised Trey the day before.

"Pancakes and sausage. Make sure they send up real maple syrup

and none of that Aunt Jemima shit.”

He laughed as he called down to order her pancakes and sausage. He ordered his usual: two eggs over easy, sausage and two slices of toasted sourdough bread.

Linx walked into the living room and found her on the sofa glancing down at her phone.

“Everything okay?”

Trista looked up, her sky blue eyes bright. “Yeah. It’s just a text from Trey. He and Keri got to Northern Ireland safely and are going to stay in Belfast for the night.”

“Is that safe?”

“It should be if they stay on the Catholic side. There is a charter there for the Saints. They will give him refuge until he can get to Omagh. Dizzy lost a niece in the blast too and was grateful to Trey for taking out so many White Knights. He couldn't risk revenge—his oldest son, Cillian, is on trial for murder of an ATF agent, so the club can't afford any more heat.”

There was a knock at the door and he stood. “Hold that thought. I want to tell you something.”

Linx opened the door and came face-to-face with Clooney. He was

dressed in a pair of clean black jeans and a white silk shirt. He certainly didn't look like a scruffy biker with his hair cut close to the scalp and clean-shaven face.

“What are you doing here, Bastard?”

Clooney's steel-gray eyes were cold and lifeless as he flashed a badge. “It's U.S. Marshal Hinton to you. Is Trista here?”

She must have heard his voice because she ran down the hall and was about to say something when she saw the badge. “Oh Fuck! Do the Bastards know you're a federal agent?”

“Of course not, or I would be dead.” His eyes softened as he looked in her direction. “We need to talk. May I come in?”

Linx opened the door wider and Clooney-Hinton walked in, strolled to the living room and sat down on the sofa. Both he and Trista continued to stand.

“How old are you? If you’re a Fed, you sure as fuck aren’t twenty-two. Shouldn’t you be arrested for pedophilia or something? You broke my virginity when I was *seventeen*.”

Clooney-Hinton laughed dryly. “Naturally, I would have immunity for any illegal activities I have been

involved in while undercover, and that includes the botched murder of Brooklyn Decker. He's no longer unconscious and he's squawking like a chicken in Carson City to the FBI Homeland Security, the U.S. Marshals and anyone else he can get his greasy hands on. He wants in the Witness Protection Program."

Linx stared at Trista whose jaw was flexed from her teeth grinding so hard together. "What the hell does any of this have to do with me?"

"Well, we know up until last evening, Trey was staying at Caesars Palace and then he and his porn star

girlfriend, Keri Nielsen, took a cab to MGM Grand. Unfortunately, we lost them there and they haven't been on the radar since. Where is he, Trista? He would have told you before he high-tailed it out of here."

"I don't know," Trista lied, straight-faced, her face devoid of any emotion.

Clooney-Hinton glared at Linx. "And what about you, Mr. Carter? We know you wired him money but since he is a computer expert we'll never find it but...he must have said *something* to you. Twenty grand isn't exactly a small chunk of change."

He stared at the duplicitous

agent and thought the guy must have been in his late twenties, older than him, yet he'd fucked his wife when she'd been a minor and nothing would happen to him? He wasn't about to tell this prick anything.

"Trey said he needed the money, something about trying to get to Vancouver."

"Washington state?"

"No, Vancouver in Canada. Apparently there's a charter there."

Clooney-Hinton nodded his head. "Unfortunately, that isn't the only reason why I'm here. You two

are to come with me.”

“Is this a social call or are we under arrest for something?” Trista stepped closer to Linx and wrapped an arm around his waist.

“No. You didn’t know about Brooklyn Decker because he wouldn’t have told you. If he did, he would have been stupid and Trey Lennon is anything but stupid.” The U.S. Marshal stood. “No, this has something to do with an entirely *different* issue. Please follow me down to the lobby. We have a government vehicle waiting. If you refuse to comply, then I *will* be forced to place you both under

arrest.”

Linx looked at Trista and she nodded her head. “Will we be back before check out? If not, can we at least put our luggage in my vehicle so we can take off when we get back?”

Clooney-Hinton rolled his eyes. “Yes, that would probably be best. By the way, I took the liberty of cancelling your breakfast. There will be plenty of food where we’re going.”

Linx felt like he was in a dream as he and Trista loaded their luggage into her SUV before she locked the vehicle and handed the keys to him.

“Don’t worry about checking out—we’ll take care of that.”

They were both escorted to a government vehicle, a black Chevy Tahoe with tinted windows so dark they looked black, even in direct sunshine.

Linx and Trista hopped into the back and she whispered to him, “What do you think this is about?”

He shook his head. “I wish I knew, but I can tell you that they don’t plan to tell us anything. Where ever we’re going is going to be classified and we are strictly on a ‘need to know’ basis. They don’t trust us, so we’ve only got one

option: go along with whatever they have planned.”

“This doesn’t feel right, Linx. Why would a U.S. Marshal infiltrate the MC? The FBI, ATF—I can understand, but...what the hell do the Marshals do? Why would they be so desperate, they’d plant a mole? Clooney is *dead* once Jonesy finds out.”

“Hey, I can hear, you know? The club isn’t going to find out and if they do then I know exactly where to come calling. I wouldn’t hesitate to put a bullet in the back of your skull to protect my identity, Trista.”

“How the hell were you planning

to make a life with me? Was that all bullshit talk and part of your persona?" she snapped back with anger and genuine hurt in her voice.

"No, that wasn't an act, unfortunately. I was willing to take the chance and tell you if we had gotten together. You know a lot and I knew I would be able to control you—you need your brother free and I am the only person who can guarantee his ass doesn't end up back in prison."

Linx grabbed Trista's hand and squeezed. She responded by squeezing back and they endured the rest of the ride in silence, rather

than say anything else to this man. Anything they accidentally admitted might just close a cage door around them. It was better to act like they knew very little and send the Marshals on a goose chase to Canada.

They finally arrived at Nellis Air Force Base and passed through check points with ease. What the hell were they doing here? The place had tighter protection than Fort Knox. There were military checkpoints *everywhere*.

After passing several, they drove out to a gray and black, recently designed-looking building that was

in the middle of a barren desert area. The vehicle came to a stop and Linx helped Trista out while Clooney-Hinton stepped out from his side.

“Just remember you’re civilians on U.S. government land. One wrong move and you *will* be shot. We don’t wound either...if we consider you a threat you will be taken out of here in a body-bag.”

“Save the canned speech for someone who actually gives a damn and go fuck yourself.” Trista glared at her ex-boyfriend, her blue eyes colder than an Eskimo’s dick. “I’m going to ask you one more time

because I'm getting tired of repeating myself like a goddamn parrot! Why. Are. We. Here?"

"You'll find out soon enough. Follow me."

Linx and Trista stepped in line behind him and were flanked by two military officers with automatic firearms. He'd seen more than enough in his life to know those were loaded with the kind of ammo that splintered when it pierced the body; almost any shot to the body cavity would be fatal. A bullet wound to the arms or legs would possibly result in amputation from the point you were shot. It was not a

pretty scenario he painted in his head.

Clooney-Hinton led them through long corridors where card keys and passwords were needed to enter. The last one had voice recognition technology. He then turned toward them but his gaze was firmly locked on Trista.

“By the way, I’m thirty but have always looked young for my age. I did serve in Afghanistan under the United States Air Force, but that was way back in 2002. After I was honorably discharged, I changed careers and decided to become a U.S. Marshal. We have been trying

to infiltrate and destroy these biker gangs for decades. They are just as much of a threat to the security of the United States as the Russian, Chechen, Ukrainian Mafia organizations and the Chinese Triads.

“We tried to go through Jackson, but his business dealings are legit and he has nothing to do with the biker gangs. The White Knights are too unstable and it was decided there would be too much scrutiny if we tried to infiltrate Lucifer’s Saints. Besides Dizzy’s all-white policy, he insists most of your lineage be Irish. Unfortunately, I’m English, Dutch

and German, so that kind of left me assed out. The Bastards were the final choice so I hope you realize, it was absolutely nothing personal.”

“Nothing personal my ass. You fucked me for over a year and pretended to love me yet that isn’t personal? How the hell did you get Trey to sponsor you?”

“Blackmail. He knows who I am and that makes him a dangerous commodity. I also promised to keep him out of prison if he cooperated. Whether you realize it or not, the life of violence, murder and mayhem that has surrounded the towns of Pine Bluff, Birch Tree and Black Oak

in Northern Nevada will soon be coming to an end. The MCs are nothing but relics of a forgotten era and have outlived their usefulness. They should have died off with the vast majority of the Italian Mafia.”

“Just shut up,” Trista snapped before she grabbed Linx’s hand again and held on tight. “I don’t want to hear anymore, I just want to know why I’m here.”

Linx tried to concentrate on the air conditioned room but it was no use. He was just as curious as to why they had been brought to this place as Trista and although he tried to hide it, his heart hammered inside

his chest. He hadn't felt this kind of anticipation since the last time they played a show on the Gods of Rock Tour.

Clooney-Hinton turned away from them, punched in a code and then said, "Marcus Hinton."

The light on the key pad next to the heavy, steel-plated door turned from red to green and the doors slid open.

"Come on, the door only stays open for ten seconds unless there has been a security breach."

Linx and Trista walked through the doors quickly behind him and

the door abruptly shut, the lock sounding in place. He noticed the soldiers weren't behind them anymore as they continued to walk down another endless hallway.

He took her hand in his again and she accepted it willingly, following the guy they had thought was a biker and member of the Demon's Bastards, until he showed up at their hotel suite and dropped the U.S. Marshall bomb. The way he said his name into the voice recognition software was the last puzzle. He really was a federal agent who had infiltrated one of the most notorious biker clubs in history.

Clooney-Hinton stopped at a plain, steel-plated door and knocked softly.

There were sounds from the other side of the room before the door was opened by a middle-aged gentlemen, obviously Irish, with killer sky blue eyes—Trista's eyes—and good looking features. He glanced at Linx quickly, but it was Trista who held his gaze.

Linx glanced at his wife as she stared into the man's eyes in obvious disbelief.

She blinked several times before she opened her mouth and said, "Daddy, is that you?"

Chapter Twenty-One

MOTHER OF CHRIST.

My fucking father was alive and breathing—staring back at me as if I were an alien. Soon, my mother joined him but she had no hesitations. She walked over and embraced me.

“Oh my sweet baby, I’ve missed you so much.”

Linx had let go of my hand and I

embraced her back. I wanted to hold on for dear life, because this couldn't be possible. If they were alive, then who had we buried in the family plots at Pine Bluff Cemetery?

As we separated, she finally glanced at Linx, her eyes wandering back to me. "Why are you with Linx Carter?"

"I would prefer you address me as if I'm standing here in front of your face."

Linx's cornflower blue eyes had changed and they were filled with so much frustration and pain. I knew he was suffering just as much as I was, yet, I still couldn't believe how

my parents had fooled so many people into believing they were dead.

Were Tristan and Taryn alive too? Would I get to see them?

“How?” I looked from Dad to Mom and back again. “I mean...the Sheriff said they ran tests and they came back positive for your DNA.”

“Brooklyn Decker saw a meet with your father and I go down,” my ex-boyfriend, who was never a prospect at all, but a thirty year old Federal Marshal who had broken my virginity, spoke up. “We found out about it because we were always tailed by FBI agents. You see, your

father—”

“I think you should leave, Marcus. This is something best explained by me and for my family’s ears only, you got that?” my father cut him off.

“Yes, sir.”

It was obvious Clooney-Hinton was pissed, but who gave a shit? I know I didn’t and the sooner that pedophile left my sight, the better it would be for all of us.

Both Linx and I walked into the room before my father closed the door.

The place was large and airy,

though it was claustrophobic at the same time—it was like the perfect apartment, except underground. We were several hundred yards under the ground and the place was protected like Fort Knox. What the hell did my parents know that they hadn't bothered to tell me?

A door opened down the hall and Tristan and Taryn slowly emerged from the hallway into where we were, which appeared to be the living room. There was a large kitchen and dining room to the right of us. In front of us was a wrap-around cream sofa surrounding a fifty-inch wall-mounted flat screen

television, Blu-ray player and a book shelf filled with different movies on both DVD and Blu-ray.

My brain seemed to shut down while I suffered from emotional overload, as Tristan and Taryn approached and embraced me.

“Hey, little sis, I missed you so much.”

Tears gleamed in my eyes before they fell down my cheeks and I inhaled his manly scent. He was a simple man; Taryn had bought him a bottle of Unforgiveable by P. Diddy for his birthday and since then, he'd worn no other scent. He smelled vaguely of juniper and

lemon, sandalwood and mandarin. It was a scent I'd sniffed for days after his "death" as I'd clutched a pillow stolen from his bed.

"I missed you too." We looked at each other before my brain cleared from the fog and I grabbed Linx's hand. "I'm not sure if you all know, but I'm a married woman now. Linx—sorry, Lennon and I, tied the knot on Friday night."

There was an uncomfortable silence before my father cleared his throat. "Why don't we all sit down, so I can tell you what is going on and you can make up your own mind about what you want to do."

My heart pounded in my chest. Did I have some colossal decision to make?

I turned to my husband and his blue eyes were intense in the subdued lighting. “Let’s just find out what’s going on, all right?”

I bit my lower lip before I nodded. Linx and I sat down on the sofa, my father sitting near us while Tristan and Taryn flanked us on the other side. I felt more trapped now than ever.

My feelings were so conflicted at the moment. I was so relieved that my family was alive, yet I knew there was a cost that would have to

be paid. Unfortunately, I didn't know what it was and that made me feel extremely uncomfortable and on edge.

My mother brought out her famous southern iced tea which was a mixture of Southern Comfort, Coke, Jack Daniels, and Tanqueray London Dry. It was not for the faint of heart and she only made it when a serious discussion was in order. Usually my parents didn't allow me to drink alcohol at all but obviously they were making an exception.

Our glasses were already poured and we only had to lean over to grab one. Linx swigged greedily.

Obviously, he was more nervous than I was. I sipped from mine as I stared at Tristan and Taryn. They held hands but beneath there was a look in their eyes; they were both trapped and they knew it.

Dad sipped from his tea as my mother put the tray, with the pitcher, on the coffee table. She sat next to my father and whispered into his ear. He nodded and stared at her for a stolen moment; his gaze finally settled on Linx and I.

“Hinton told me about the marriage and let’s just say that your timing is not only lousy, but it complicates this whole situation,

Trista.” He stood and began to pace.

All the sudden, I felt like a teenager living under my parents’ roof again. My dad was extremely angry with me, but no matter how upset he became, he never raised his voice. The piercing glare from his sky blue eyes were enough to make me feel like a piece of dog shit and I despised how he still had that control and influence over me now that I was, officially, an adult.

I squeezed Linx’s hand to the point where it must have been painful for him—but he said nothing in regards to what I was doing to him.

“Mr. Lennon, with all due respect, you haven’t been around in months. *She thought you were all dead for Christ’s sake!* I was the one who suggested the marriage in the first place, and she agreed. Whatever you need from her, we will try to help because she only wants what is best for her family. But remember: you are speaking to my wife, and I’d appreciate it if you did so with respect, and *not* like she’s an errant child.”

“I’ll start at the beginning because that makes the most sense.” He sighed before he swigged from his tea. “I was recruited right after I

got out of college. It was during the first term of the Reagan Administration and they wanted to make the FBI as formidable as the CIA but purely for the United States. We were concerned with Cuban drug cartels and American gangsters here in the States; the Bloods and the Crips—it was a very turbulent time in our country.”

“So, all this time, you’ve been an FBI agent and none of us knew?” I stood and walked over to my dad just to stop him from pacing. “You have to explain this to me because... was our move to Pine Bluff intentional?”

My dad stood in front of me and gazed at me with tear-filled blue eyes. “Yes, it was. The biker gangs were next in line and I was sent deep undercover with my family. The Bureau bought the house and we set ourselves up as accountants. Your mother did all the work since she’s the one who has the degree in Accounting, not me.

“For years, all I did was report to the Bureau about all the crooked thugs that came through our door. That was enough for them and most of the small time ones disappeared or went to prison. It wasn’t until Marcus Hinton showed up that I

knew the government was serious. They could only use tax evasion so far, especially when the Saints kept miraculous books. None of their illegal activities could be proven by their taxes—it seemed like they made all their money from remodeling classic bikes and their tow truck services. As you know, they were used in Pine Bluff, Birch Tree and Black Oak for towing the cars of drivers without insurance and who are arrested for DUIs.”

“So why did you choose the club that Trey belongs to?” I questioned in a soft voice. “You know what goes on and...do you want your son going

to prison?”

“No, of course not.” He turned away from me and sat down beside Mom again. “I’m the one who tipped him off. I’m not proud of what I have done and know that eventually, he will be considered a fugitive, but I spoke to Hinton and he has told me that Trey has immunity. The evidence he has provided regarding the Bastards is...more than helpful. However, the shooting of Brooklyn Decker complicates things because Nel is on the war path. You’re not safe and that is why I had Hinton pick you up at the hotel today.”

I had a feeling where this

conversation was going and it wasn't going to happen, not now or any time in the near future.

“No.” I strolled over and sat next to Linx. “I’m not going into Witsec. I can understand how you railroaded Tristan and Taryn into doing it, but I refuse to live my life on the run or in hiding. I’m through running, Dad. I am comfortable in L.A. and I can’t leave my husband. It’s not like Linx can just disappear. He has two children. I won’t ask that of him and you can’t either.”

“Well, no one is asking your *husband* to follow you.” My mom glared at me with angry hazel-green

eyes. “This isn’t negotiable, Trista. You are only eighteen years old and you have known each other less than two months. You’ve only been married a couple days. We already have the paperwork drawn up for a quickie divorce and your new identity has been secured by the Witness Protection Program. We won’t leave you to be kidnapped or murdered by those thugs and if you aren’t in Witsec, we can’t protect you either.”

Linux slid an arm around my waist and squeezed softly. “If she does decide to go into the Witness Protection Program, will I be able to

see her?”

“No.” Tristan sighed out loud. “Everyone knows this is an act of rebellion on your part, Trista. No way can you fall in love in six weeks with anyone. It just isn’t *possible*. Linx knows what I am talking about and if he truly cares about you then he will let you go.”

The claustrophobic atmosphere had finally reached dangerous levels and I began to breathe heavily. I felt like I couldn’t get enough air into my lungs no matter how many deep breaths I took. I reached into my handbag, opened the bottle of Xanax and placed a two milligram

tablet in my mouth before I swallowed it down with my alcoholic beverage.

Taryn cleared her throat. “It’s classified where we’re going—even we don’t know and the first few months will be spent outside of the country. You have to understand until the clubs are destroyed then you are in danger. They will come after you, Trista. Trey is in Northern Ireland and that leaves you as the only Lennon who is vulnerable.”

“I’m not a child and none of you can make this decision for me. I am not leaving Linx. I wouldn’t be any good to you anyway...if your ‘deaths’

destroyed my life then I am just giving up one hell I knew of for another.” I struggled with an unruly strand of hair that fell into my face. “Don’t make me choose between my family and my husband—it isn’t fair.”

My mother stood and walked over to kneel in front of me. “Stop acting like a child, Trista. This isn’t negotiable. You must leave here and you can’t go back to L.A. Every charter of the White Knights is gunning for you and they will do whatever it takes to make sure you end up dead, just to send a message to your brother.”

The tears flowed from my eyes and I couldn't stop them no matter how hard I tried. "What part of 'I won't leave my husband' can't you understand, Mom? What if your parents had told you the same thing about Dad? Would that have been an easy decision for you to make?"

"I know you all think I am just some naïve, slip of a girl who is talking out of her ass with lust but that isn't the situation at all. I am still crippled by what I thought happened to you, but who do you think helped me through it all? Who do you think knows my deepest and darkest fears and still managed to

stay by my side? Who?! *Linx* is the only person who has kept me from losing my shit entirely and if I left with you, I would be right in that very same place again, emotionally and psychologically speaking. Except this time it would be *Linx* I would mourn, not the four of you.”

My father glared at me. “You have twenty-four hours to make up your mind. Hinton will give you an untraceable number to call. Then we are gone. We won’t be anything but ghosts and smoke. Is that what you want? To never see us again?”

“I didn’t say that, Dad—don’t put words in my mouth—but I refuse to

change my mind about Witsec. I won't be able to do it and someone would find me out...recognize me as Linx's wife. I am not doing this out of selfishness but selflessness. I refuse to put your lives in danger. I'll be fine, I promise."

My mother handed the card to Linx and looked at him with a penetrating glare that could shatter glass. "Twenty-four hours. If you're half the man I think you, are then you will convince your wife to do what's best for her health and safety."

I stood suddenly and grabbed Linx's hand. "I need to get out of

here. I am suffering from serious claustrophobia and you still haven't answered any of my questions like what about the meeting with Clooney and Dad? Why was Brooklyn Decker—some *loser* biker and former meth user, no cop in the Tri-towns area would piss on if he was suddenly set on fire—such a threat, you two thought it was the right time to rip our family to shreds by faking your deaths? It doesn't make any sense and there's something you aren't telling me.”

My father refused to look at me as he finished his southern ice tea. “Dizzy had his suspicions and that

fucker son of his, Cillian, convinced his father I might be an informant. They planned to kill your mother and I by making it look like an accident. We were just too smart and did it first.”

“But that isn’t all, is it?”

“It never is,” Tristan murmured.

I shook my head before my husband and I headed to the front door. As usual, my mother stopped us before we got there. She embraced me and I hugged her back with my free arm.

“*Chère*, think about this really carefully. My *Mémé* had a saying for

every occasion and in this one, she would have said, '*le pire n'est pas derrière nous mais en avance sur nous*'. Please don't do something you'll live to regret."

That was dramatic and brought this dangerous situation into more focus. My mother always knew where to hit where it would hurt my heart the most.

The worst is not behind us but in front of us.

Much more lyrical in French, but that didn't make it true and I was about to call bullshit on her and her philosophical musings.

“Yeah? There’s also another famous French saying my *Mémé* was fond of: ‘*plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose*’.”

“Yes, you’re correct. The more things change, the more they stay the same—but are you willing to bet your life on a will-o-the-wisp prophecy in hopes that you’ll have your longed-for happy ending, my naïve daughter? Are you willing to allow this man to literally hold your future in his hands?”

I reached for the door and opened it, surprised there weren’t any military personnel waiting for Linx and me.

I bit my lip and studied the faces of my father, Tristan, Taryn and lastly, my beautiful mother. “He already does...and it’s a risk I’m willing to take.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

LINX FELT SORRY for his sister and her pit-bull, Kiki, comfortably situated in the back seat of Trista's Ford Edge. They were only an hour away from his Hollywood Hills home but as exhausted as he felt, it might as well have been a million miles away from home.

“You heard them, Trista. Why are we driving back at all? Do you think

I want anything to happen to you? It would haunt me for the rest of my life.”

“I’m not going to leave you to play happy fucking family with them. Are you *trying* to get rid of me already? Jesus, we just got married, and you already want to leave me?”

They couldn’t exactly say who they were talking about since her parents, brother, and his fiancée were still supposed to be be dead.

“I just want what is best for you and they can protect you much better than I can.”

She sighed out loud and ran her

fingers through her thick, silky brown hair. “Listen, even if I were to decide that’s what’s ‘best for me’, what happens to us? I don’t believe in long distance relationships because they don’t fucking work. They have each other and what will I have? *Nothing*. I won’t have you, and I will be alone yet again. I’m not huge on the whole one night stand scenario and after everything I’ve been through, college isn’t exactly the first thing I have on my mind. I mean, do I *look* like I’m ready for *homework*?”

“No, but I want you to be safe and I want you to be happy. The

thought of losing you kills me, literally makes me want to punch something, hard. I'm not normally violent, Trista, but this, this could push me to it. I *need* you safe."

"I'm, safe and happy, Linx, right here with you. I found out something spectacular and amazing today. I have accepted they're lost to me again but I can't pretend like what we have between us isn't worth fighting for and I wished to God you thought that too."

Linx didn't say anything further. The disagreement between them had been going on all day and he was truly tired of fighting.

“Listen, Loire said Kiki and I could stay with her, so can you just drop me off at her place.”

Although a hot bed for well-to-do gay men, Loire resided in West Hollywood and he was only too happy to drop his sister off. If anything, it meant that he and Trista could speak honestly and frank.

“I’ll be right back,”

Trista was completely zoned out before she smiled brightly. “Take your time.”

He walked his sister up to the second floor of Loire’s swanky condo

and she answered the door in record timing.

“What do I owe you for this?” He pulled out his wallet in anticipation.

Loire waved her hand away. “It was a freebie and I have no intention of charging you. She’s just what a depressed woman like me needs. Plus, we get started on training tomorrow—Nil and I could use all the hands we can get. We’re always overbooked.”

Trinity hugged him tightly. “Take care of that beautiful bride of yours. Stop trying to sacrifice your happiness for everyone else—believe me, if anyone deserves to be

content, it's you. Just remember this about Trista: she's old enough to break hearts and young enough to not realize the path of her destruction."

"Listen, I better get back to the car." Linx ended their embrace and stepped back. "Have a good night and I'll talk to you tomorrow."

"I don't know, will you?"

He laughed as the door closed behind him. He heard the deadbolt snap in place before he ran down to the SUV.

Linx couldn't express the amount of relief he felt when he saw Trista

sitting in the same position as he'd left her. Her parents had warned him she was in danger and what the hell did he do? He'd left her at the mercy of that very same threat the moment he stepped out of the vehicle to make sure his sister arrived at Loire's second story condo safely.

She was silent on the drive home and he didn't push it. He didn't want to see her in anymore pain and right now, she was just hanging on by a thread.

He truly understood how she felt and God knows he didn't want to lose her. He *loved* her. She was the

heart that beat in his chest, the air he drew within his lungs. It was like being asked to let one's soul die so that the person could be safe and it hurt like hell. He also knew he would never recover if he lost her. He would become a shell of himself, but he was willing to do it if it meant Trista would be free and safe.

Once they arrived at his house, he parked in his massive garage and got out of the car. The only item he grabbed was his cell phone. Trista slung her handbag over her shoulder and walked inside the house with him.

Linx immediately made a beeline

for the kitchen, grabbed a Heineken and flipped the top off before he swallowed half the contents in a couple of swallows. He needed a drink badly and after drinking water the whole ride back from Vegas, his favorite imported lager hit the spot.

“Can I have one too, please?”

He turned to see Trista. She still looked beautiful, even if she'd changed into a pair of loose pajama bottoms with Victoria's Secret written all over them, and a pale pink camisole, her ripe breasts braless and her nipples hard as pebbles.

Linx grabbed a beer for her,

opened it and handed it to her.

“Thanks. Meet me in the sitting room. We need to talk.”

He watched her, taking in her full-back tattoo that was dedicated to a family that hadn't really died. It was all such a sordid yet beautiful lie and what was so awful about the whole situation was that they still didn't know the whole truth.

Trista's father had been an FBI agent almost his whole adult life. They learned how to lie for a living and do it straight-faced without a shred of remorse or guilt. Her mother was also highly trained, though she hadn't admitted to being

part of the bureau.

Government employees, of the clandestine origin, always had a certain feel to them he couldn't possibly explain. One of his favorite cousins, Joey, was a Navy SEAL. The man was complete and utter ice. He didn't have a warm bone in his body and his job had eventually destroyed his marriage, but he didn't give a fuck. His lucrative role as a Navy SEAL brought him more pleasure than a marriage and children ever could.

Linx, on the other hand, was the opposite.

There was nothing he liked to do

more than perform. He was built for playing bass, and singing backup to Talia was a trip. He loved Winter's Regret because they were a huge dysfunctional family that somehow worked.

However, he *would* risk true happiness over his band. His band was what he worked for his entire life, his profession, but it couldn't replace the love and devotion from a good woman. He knew how he felt about Trista, and she was so deeply embedded in his skin, she could easily be a tattoo. Her own pain was like barbed wire, which cut him every time he saw her conflicted.

Linx walked into the living room and sat beside her on the sofa. She sat Indian-style and sipped from her lager.

“Are you trying to push me away because you truly care about my safety or because you regret marrying me? I expect you to be honest with your answer...*Lennon*.” Her tone was cold, unfeeling and he knew it was her way of protecting her own feelings.

“I told you that would never be the case. I could never leave you and that includes pushing you away. I. Love. You. How hard is that to understand?”

She turned toward him with eyes bright, shiny with tears that never fell. “I love you too, goddamn it, but you’re going to have to fight for me. Prove you love me just as much as I love you and then maybe, just maybe, I will stop thinking about this ridiculous deal my parents have put on the table.

“It’s easy for them because my mother has my dad. Tristan and Taryn have each other. I will be the odd one out and who will be there to hold me at night? Who will I find to treat me with so much love and affection until it is coming out of their pores? How do I go on to live a

normal, productive life when half of my heart would be missing? You *know* you're that other half and I *also* know you don't want me to leave either, so fucking say it already!"

Linx slammed his bottle down on the coffee table and reached over to cup her face. She was beautiful and vulnerable with him, inside his arms, when he was inside of her. Sure, she had some growing up to do, but she would do it much faster if she stayed with him rather than running back to her mother and father.

"I don't want you to go! There,

I've said it! But you already *know* that. I don't do long distance relationships either; I can't take the chance of losing you. Besides, if you go, I won't even get to know *where* you are. It would kill me to lose you, Trista. Don't you understand that if I'm half your heart then you're also half of mine?"

He paused, finished his beer and set it on the Persian carpet next to the sofa. "Plus, I'm only human and I would hold out for as long as I could, but eventually I would stray; with you gone for an indefinite time, in an indefinite place. I'd be alone, it would happen. I cannot deal with

two failed marriages. Please tell me you're not willing to give up, on me, on us, on everything we have with nothing but theories and speculation?"

The tears broke, flowing down her cheeks as her face slowly turned beet-red and he knew he'd broken through.

She placed her arms around his neck and whispered in his ear. "I'm not going anywhere."

Linx struggled to hold her tight, afraid he might break her in half with his relief. She'd saved him from the demons that constantly plagued him, and only then was he truly free

to be himself. She didn't demand for him to change and he would never ask it of her either. They needed each other, not because they couldn't get enough physically but the co-dependency that had formed between them allowed them the emotional healing they both wanted and needed.

He wasn't stupid—he knew he couldn't fix her, any more than she could fix him—but together, they could help each other become stronger and wasn't that the point of life? No one wanted to wander through life walking wounded but too many people did and he didn't

want them to be another two individuals who ended up in the same scenario. He couldn't let her family take her away because the moment they married, they became each other's family. *She* was his family. He'd be damned if he allowed anyone to take that away from him—not her parents, her brothers or anyone else for the matter.

As they loosened their holds, she looked into his eyes and he found himself falling into those deep pools of blue. She could express every feeling with those eyes and he couldn't help his arousal to the look

on her face.

Trista leaned over and kissed him on the mouth, her lips gentle as his hands wandered under her cami to the small of her back, where he met soft, firm flesh. She opened her mouth and when her tongue brushed against his, ever so lightly, he demanded more, deepening their kiss until neither could breathe without panting.

She pulled back as he grabbed the straps of her cami and slid them down over her shoulders to reveal her naked breasts.

“Listen...I wanted to say something when we were in Vegas

but then all that shit happened and we left. I'm too young for kids and you already have two by that ex of yours. Shouldn't we...play it safe? I mean, I think we should use condoms until I'm at least able to get on birth control." She stared down at his tattoos before raising her eyes toward his with reluctance.

Linx stared at her intently. "We don't have to use condoms because there's something I wanted to tell you in Vegas too, just before your goddamn pedophile ex showed up and declared himself a federal agent. He ought to be put in jail, by the way, for sleeping with you while you

were underage instead of getting a free pass because he's undercover.

“Anyway, my point is I wouldn't have intentionally started having sex with you without protection if I didn't know you would be all right. At the moment, I'm shooting blanks, Trista. I can't get you pregnant because I had a vasectomy.”

Her eyes went wide and he knew that had to be a total mood killer, he just wished someone would tell that to the raging hard-on painfully straining his jeans.

“So, does that mean you can't *ever* get me pregnant? I may not want kids right now, but I think

eventually I would like to be the mother to at least one or two of your little rugrats,” she joked, though he could hear the hidden sadness beneath her tone.

“It’s reversible. I knew I didn’t want to knock Cassidy up again because Jimi was the last play for me to stay with her; when it didn’t work, she turned ugly and vindictive. Plus, we tour and before you, there were...women on tour I slept with. Despite the use of condoms, they can break or slip off. I can’t afford to have baby mamas running around selling stories about me to the tabloids. It would kill my

parents. It was to protect me and by default, it protects you too.”

Trista stared at him for a long time before she took off her cami and threw it on the sofa. That was all the encouragement he needed and he immediately palmed her breasts, kneading them softly with gentle yet greedy hands as he began to devour her mouth again.

She was his own tiny slice of heaven and as his kisses led lower to her neck and down her collar bone, she fisted her hands through his hair. He removed his hand off her breast and tackled the nipple with his mouth, sucking in between soft

bites with his teeth that had her moaning out loud as she ground her hips into his groin.

He was hard as a proverbial rock, and completely ready for this sexual display of affection. Linx switched nipples and worked on the right one with his mouth while his index and thumb squeezed the other; his other hand worked inside her pajama bottoms.

The area between her legs was warm and wet to his touch as he zeroed in on her clit and stroked it softly while she made soft noises in his ear. The moment his fingers plunged inside of her, she rocked

her hips back and forth against them and every time he reached the hilt, his fingers were drenched with her juices. She was so turned on, so was he, but no way were they having another sofa incident.

It took all the will power he could muster, but he withdrew his fingers, stripped her of both her pajama bottoms and panties, which landed carelessly on the floor, and hoisted her into his arms as if she were light as a feather.

Her beautiful mouth worked on his neck, her warm, wet tongue teasing his jaw before she bit softly on his earlobe.

“I know we are married, but does that mean you can’t fuck me? Hard, raw, with unrestrained passion and the need to let go all of the shit from the past? You won’t hurt me; I want you to give it to me hard and rough—I won’t break. You treat me like I am fragile but I’m not—I never have been. I want you to show me that side of you that doesn’t want to hide anymore. Please, let me in and show me all of you—the way I have laid myself naked and bare before you.”

Linx wanted that more than anything, but he could admit, if only to himself, that he was afraid of hurting her. He treated her like a

rare piece of silk because the thought of her being in pain was an anathema to the way he had been reared as a child.

The rock star life was brutal and he was capable of having rough sex, but he wasn't sure yet if he was ready to defile this young woman, who'd crept like a thief in the night and stole his heart right out of his chest.

He would do anything for Trista yet could he fulfill her request and treat her so roughly? It was a question that plagued him even after he'd laid her on the bed, while he stripped out of his own clothes.

Linx stood before her, naked and unashamed. He had nothing to fear because she knew every ounce of his flesh and had seen him both aroused and flaccid. They'd hidden nothing from one another.

He approached her with a trepidation that was intimidating and out of character. Yes, he wanted to please her but he didn't want to hurt her in the process.

"Are we going to fuck?" Trista inquired crudely, as she splayed her legs before him; he could see every inch of her wet folds glistening with moisture in the dim lights of the bedroom.

He pulled her by the waist until her ass was inches from the bed and spread her beautiful lips with his fingers. The holy of all holes was moist and wet and so ready for him.

Linx tongued her deeply, sliding inside her as far as he could go and she smelled wonderful. She was a mixture of vanilla and freesia with her own musky scent that drove his hormones and had his cock twitching like crazy.

Her vaginal muscles contracted around his tongue as he pulled it out and began to devour that sweet, hard nub at the hood of her beautiful snatch. He sucked and

tongued her until she wriggled beneath him, her hips had a mind of their own, bucking up to his mouth until he brought her with a mind-numbing orgasm where he could have sworn she was speaking in tongues.

Trista sat up suddenly and placed her arms around his neck. His lips met hers again; he sucked on her tongue in a slow, erotic fashion and nibbled at her bottom lip only to plunge his tongue deep in her mouth as he had her sweet spot. He could still taste her, and knew she could as well, which turned him on even more—if that was even

possible. Their lip action was legendary in its fierceness; they clung to each other, yet fought as well, her hands and fingers clawing at his back and waist.

She grasped his ass with one hand while the other grabbed his cock. She guided him inside her gently and slowly before she began to do major work. From her position on the bed, she used her arms to support her weight as she ground into him, her inner muscles clinging tightly in lost passion and agony around his cock and her eyes rolled into the back of her head.

Linx finally allowed himself a

deep breath and let go of his inhibitions that only applied to Trista. He grabbed her by the waist and began to pound into her relentlessly only for her to meet his deep, severe strokes with the grinding of her hips. She was so hot, her body was on fire and a thin sheet of sweat coated her body as he began to fuck her roughly.

Trista smiled and wrapped her arms around his neck as she kissed him hard and this time, it was teeth and tongue, unbridled passion mixed with an animal instinct that could not be contained. They both let go and clawed at each other as if

they were fucking as much as fighting and his cock had never been harder nor had he ever wanted to hold out for as long as possible, as he did now.

Her beautiful hands left scratch marks along his back as she slammed her body against his, her breasts pressed firmly against his chest. His fingers dug into the soft yet firm flesh of her hips and gripped her tighter, harder. She trapped his tongue in her mouth with sharp teeth and then let go; he devoured her lips again and kissed her until their lips were bruised and ached with intense and explosive

feelings of wild, untamed sex.

Linx pulled out abruptly and flipped her onto her stomach. He loved looking at her, yet she's wanted to see the real him and this was it. He joined her on the bed and pushed her forward with little effort before she got on all fours and exposed herself to him.

God, every inch of her body was a work of art, even the sexually parted lips between her legs as her hand reached under and opened herself to him in a crude and erotic fashion. Her finger slid easily inside, before she circled that same finger around her clit pleasing herself.

He kissed her at the base of her neck, where the rose tattoo was, and guided himself back into what had to be the closest thing to paradise, on this side of heaven. She was completely vulnerable and when she turned to smirk at him with mischievous blue eyes, the world seemed to come undone.

He could see the crimson indents from his hands on her flesh and he grabbed her by her waist before he rocked in and out of her, slow at first before he thrust into her deeper, harder and with quicker thrusts.

“Yes, fuck me,” she whispered.

“Oh, believe me, honey, I will. You want your pussy pounded?”

“Yes,” she gasped out loud. “I want you to really feel every inch of me without being afraid I’m made of glass because I’m not. I want you to let yourself go, Linx.”

And he did just that, as he found a rhythm that pleased them both. He let himself go but rather than do her like they were starring in their own porn flick, he allowed himself to invade her deeply with his cock; hard fast strokes that hit her G-spot and had her panting, scratching at the sheets, as he admired her back tattoo that was a complete, yet

ultimately beautiful, lie.

With his body drenched with sweat, his hair damp, he leaned on to her and snaked a hand between her legs, where he found her clit and did slow circles with his index finger; he completely opened her up, molded her and made her one hundred percent his.

She finally shuddered beneath him and with a loud wail, she cried, "I'm coming!"

It was typical female behavior, but once her vaginal muscles clamped around his cock, he became a cliché himself when all he murmured was, "Fuck, baby, I'm

coming with you.”

Their orgasms, almost perfectly in sync, washed over them in waves that seemed never-ending and he didn't withdraw until his dick was semi-soft—with that, he collapsed on his back.

Trista sidled up to him and laid her damp head on his chest as he stroked the wet strands of her hair and concentrated on how complete he felt.

It was, and never had been, about them completing one another.

They couldn't and besides, it was just a sorry, silly quote from a

popular Tom Cruise film.

It couldn't have been about them "fixing" each other either.

The damage was done and they were pretty much fucked from the time they were born, but that was life and to truly love another person, one had to first learn how to love themselves.

It was about this.

The complete and utter silence between them as they listened to their heart beats, yet her right hand and his left were clasped together and they wouldn't let go.

An unspeakable and miraculous

bond had formed between two very screwed up people, but with each day, they became less damaged and more equipped to handle what life threw at them.

No one ever said that they would have an easy road to climb, but he knew he would enjoy every step because he had Trista by his side—with her, he felt he could conquer the world and live to tell his tale about how he'd done it.

“I love you,” he whispered to her. “I am so fucking in love with you right now that my heart hurts and my head aches. I didn’t believe it was possible to feel so much for one

person.”

Trista stared at him with big sky-blue eyes. “What do you love about me?”

“The way you curl your lip when you’re annoyed and the way you smirk when you’re nervous. I love the way you drink your beer and when you look at me like that, I just want to dive into you. You’re remarkable, only eighteen years old and although you don’t think you know everything, you’re so perceptive and intelligent.”

Linx paused and massaged her scalp. “This is what made me fall in love with you. Even when you lie,

you're open and honest to a fault. There is no deception in you because those eyes tell a story that made me feel like I had seen you bare and nude before I'd ever pulled one item of clothing off of you. While you're the hottest bitch I have ever seen, your looks and that fabulous body are only a fraction of what makes me love you as much as I do."

Trista swallowed hard and kissed his chest. "I love your devotion and your gentle nature. Every day, you try to be a better person than you were the day before and you are constantly striving to improve

yourself. I love you aren't an alcoholic or a drug addict and how every solution can't be solved with your fists. I love the simplicity between us. I knew what made you ache the moment those your eyes stared into mine. You're a beautiful, fucked up man who only gets better because one day, you won't always be so bitter."

She looked away before her eyes met his again. "I love your drive, your tenacity to act on what you want. I love your fearlessness; that love and lust for life that has given mine a whole new meaning. I love that you're kinky yet straight-laced,

tattoo covered but not a douchebag that was just released from prison. Most of all, I love how you give anything and anyone you care about your all. You play bass the same way you love and that is with quiet passion and a desire for perfection. It will never be achieved but that doesn't mean you ever give up trying, and, to me, it's not only beautiful, it's fucking poetry."

He touched her bottom lip with his thumb and she suckled on it before he laid her on her back and kissed her ever so gently on those perfect, pink lips.

"Goodnight, my gorgeous wife."

“Goodnight, my drop-dead sexy husband.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

I WILL ALWAYS remember that day because, yet again, my life changed.

I should have been used to change by now. It was the only constant.

Since I'd married Linx, I'd moved from Talia's house to his and brought my wardrobe and Ford Edge with me. I also had my two trusty bodyguards who Linx now paid to

watch over me.

Being married to a rock star, regardless that he was “just the bassist” for Winter’s Regret was hard. My dress size, hair, clothes, shoes and over-all attitude were constantly judged by strangers online, the tabloids and the mainstream press.

The first time I saw a picture of myself picking up groceries from Whole Foods in *Society Magazine*, I almost fell off the sofa.

Funny, how the media couldn’t find out anything about me.

Since I had not agreed to enter

Witsec with my family, every general item on me, from my birth certificate to my Driver's License picture was classified. I barely managed to order a copy of our marriage certificate before that, too, became classified.

Somehow, my age changed in the media from eighteen to twenty-one, and no one, not even Pine Bluff residents, could share anything about Trista Lennon-Carter. No one had any photographs of me in high school and no one knew when I graduated or when I'd left Pine Bluff.

I knew that only the Federal government could insert that kind

of control, and it was scary and liberating at the same time.

Linx came home one afternoon and he held a stack of mail, including an oversized, certified letter he had to pick up at the post office.

I looked at the manila envelope. “What’s this?”

“It’s for you.”

He walked into the kitchen and grabbed two Heinekens as I opened the document with shaky hands. I pulled everything out and gasped at what was before me.

There was a note attached.

Trista,

You are still my daughter and I love you. Here are the new documents you and Linx will need. You are officially Trista Carter. Your birthdate is December 1, 1993. You graduated from Lake Tahoe Academy and attended Stanford for two years before you dropped out to become a personal assistant to your rock star cousin. You are married to Lennon “Linx” Carter and you and Linx share joint custody with Jimi and Brady Carter’s mother, Cassidy Monroe, née Carter.

All documents are included. You will also find a new birth certificate,

marriage certificate, and two passports: one American and one Irish. If you two ever need to run, there is information listing a safety deposit box and cash in euros, dollars and pounds, stored at the Grand Cayman Bank on the main island in the Caymans.

You will also find a disposable, untraceable cell phone. Do NOT use it unless it is an emergency. We never know who could be watching. Love you, and no matter whether your mother or I agree with your decision, we are proud we raised a strong-willed and intelligent daughter who can make up her own mind.

With Love,

Dad

I handed the note to Linx and he read it quickly before he gathered all the documentation and slipped it back into the manila envelope.

“I’m taking this up to the bedroom safe; it shouldn’t be anywhere in plain sight.”

“Did you have anything at all to do with this?”

I gazed at him for a long time and although he held the envelope, he didn’t look away.

“No. How could I? I haven’t a

clue where your parents are, so how could I contact them?”

He smirked before he turned around and walked up the stairs.

I smiled back and shook my head.

Linx had the where-with-all and foreknowledge to contact my parents to let them know I'd made my decision and decided to stay by his side. They had reacted quickly and shut down all information about me. Even if someone were to do a Google search, there was nothing about me. My Facebook account had been shut down as had my Twitter and Goodreads accounts.

All the books I read, and friendships I had from the past, ceased to exist. I created other accounts, but many of the people on my list who were following me were obviously aliases on Twitter—half the “friends” on Facebook I didn’t know, and my Goodreads account all the sudden filled with books I’d never read like every modern, “Mommy Porn” book that had come out in the past several years. I also seemed to like sappy NA love stories and older YA books. My favorite authors were Nyrae Dawn, M. Leighton and Michelle Muto. I’d vaguely heard of them, but quickly

bought every e-book each of them had ever written and devoured them in several days. The only indie writer I'd followed religiously wrote too-true-to-life books about motorcycle clubs and had a post-apocalyptic series.

Everything in my life became unreal and faker than the city I lived in, but I embraced my new "self" because underneath it all, I had Linx and he kept me grounded to real life.

What we shared when we were together wasn't the least bit fraudulent.

Every time my husband made

love to me was real.

When the boys came over and we horsed around until they were exhausted and fell asleep after a quick read from our Dr. Seuss collection, was very much part of my new reality.

I was so deep in thought, I didn't hear my phone ring until it was almost too late. I dug it out of my Birkin bag and answered, "Hello?"

"You can hide behind your walls, but you can't hide forever," a female voice with a strong Northern Irish accent replied in a sly manner.

"May I ask who the hell this is?"

“No you may not, *Missus* Carter. Your brother seems to have gotten himself into a wee bit of trouble, but I hear you know the codes to his bank accounts, aye?”

“Don’t you tell these mick bastards a goddamn thing!” I heard Trey yell in the background.

“You’re mistaken.” My heart began to pound and I put the caller on speaker phone as Linx walked over and held me in his arms.

“Ah, such a shame. You might have been able to save his life. With nothing to keep him around for, you just ended it.”

Trey screamed and the sound of a gun shot rang out.

The phone clicked and I knew the person on the other line had ended the call.

I turned around and embraced Linx as the tears inevitably fell from my eyes.

“Shh, we don’t know he’s dead. They do shit like this all the time over there. Who the hell did he piss off now?”

“Yeah, but we don’t know that he isn’t dead either, Linx. I don’t know even know who that was on the phone.”

He grabbed me by the arms and pulled me away. I had to look at him and into his gorgeous blue eyes.

“Listen, we have a two week vacation until we start recording again. Talia is exhausted and Dominic has sanctioned it. There is only one way we can find out whether or not your brother is truly dead and warn him about the hornet’s nest he has created here.”

I kissed Linx quickly. “How? What can we do?”

“We buy tickets to the UK and then catch the ferry over to Ireland. We can pick one up in Liverpool.”

“You’re kidding, right?”

Linx smirked in that smart-aleck, asshole way that made me want to kick him in the balls and fuck him at the same time. “Do I *sound* like I’m joking?”

“No, you sound as serious as a heart attack,” I replied before I rested my head on his chest again.

“You don’t have to be afraid, but that Irish bitch who just rudely interrupted our lives should be.”

His tone was somewhat light-hearted, but underneath it was real—hard ice in his voice and that frightened me more than his words.

“When do we leave?”

“Tomorrow. I’ll go book our tickets.”

I watched him walk up stairs and I paced for a bit before the stifling room got the better of me and I walked outside into the back yard.

This was real.

The fear.

My life had become everything I’d run from since leaving Pine Bluff, and no matter how hard I tried to escape, there was never a way to get out from under all the corruption and the crime, the stench of rot from the criminal underworld.

I sipped from my Heineken and waited until Linx joined me again.

This was it.

I had to grow up and put on my big girl panties now. Playtime was over and I couldn't just cry my way out of this or take a Xanax and bury my head underneath the pillow and pretend none of this existed.

I turned toward Linx and knew my blue eyes were hard in an otherwise soft and pleasant face.

"It's done. We leave tomorrow afternoon and the bodyguards come with us."

I nodded. "Okay. Sounds like a

plan. I love you for doing this.”

Linx walked up to me and kissed my lips. His lingered longer than necessary before he added tongue and I swirled mine gently with his until we separated. “I love you too but seriously, what other option do we have?”

My brother was alive, I could feel it in my bones and I would bring him back from Belfast.

Whatever didn't kill me would make me stronger, right?

At least according to Kanye, but as far as I was concerned, whatever and who ever fucked with my family

made me one cold hearted bitch.

This one incident had sealed my fate and Linx's too because he was married to me.

We were both officially in over our heads, in too deep, and involved with the same shit my parents had tried to save me from because it was war, whether I wanted to think of it in those terms or not. We all had to choose a side to fight for and know the enemies we were up against. Not everyone would make it out alive, but if I could live through this, I knew deep down in my heart I could survive anything.

Including the paparazzi and

marriage to a rock star.

**Trista and Linx's
story concludes with**

In Too Deep

The Lovers Duet

**Premieres
September of 2013**

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Selene Chardou is a world traveler and the alter-ego of Elle Chardou.

Ms. Chardou's writing is all about hot romance and exciting times with the wild, damaged, out of control and/or rich and famous set in the New Adult realm.

She is currently working on *Rock My Heart*, the first novel in the *Scarlet Fever Series*, which will conclude the relationship between Kasper "Kaz" Gillian and Sydney Landvik, and *In Too Deep*, the conclusion to *The Lovers Duet*. She

also has a pop stars series planned and an MC series planned that chronicles the issues between Lucifer's Saints and Demon's Bastards motorcycle clubs.

Ms. Chardou has lived abroad in Stockholm (Sweden), Manchester (England), Los Angeles, the San Francisco Bay Area and Portland. She currently resides in Las Vegas, Nevada.

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Published & Upcoming Books by Selene Chardou

One More Night Trilogy (New
Adult/Contemporary Romance/Women's
Literature)

Falling Into Lust

Falling Into Us

Falling Into Love (June/July 2013)

The Lovers Duet (New Adult/Romantic
Mystery & Suspense/Contemporary
Romance)

Out From Under

In Too Deep (September, 2013)

Scarlet Fever Series (New
Adult/Contemporary Romance/Women's
Literature)

The Will to Love (August, 2013)

Lust & Faith (October, 2013)

Grant's Muse (December, 2013)

Rock My Heart (February, 2014)

***The Rough Riders Series* (New Adult /**

Romantic

Suspense/Contemporary

Romance)

Deadly Seduction (Gisela Jackson & Cillian
"The Killer" Cox's story) [December of 2013]

Dangerous Temptations (Maeve "Misty" Cox
and Evan "Babe" Hughes story) [To Be
Announced]

Deadly Embrace (Jillian Hughes and Quinn
"Tech" Cox's story) [To Be Announced]

Dangerous Attraction (Geri Connery and
Ronan "Puck" Cox's story) [To Be Announced]

***Young, Rich & Talented Trilogy* (New
Adult/Contemporary Romance/Women's
Literature)**

Rock Me Out (Chyna Bleu's story, To Be
Announced)

Rock Me Sideways (Damian Phillip's story,
To Be Announced)

Rock Me In (Ava Martin's story, To Be

Announced)

Novels & Novellas by Elle Chardou

The Ties That Bind Trilogy
(*Contemporary Romance / Romantic*
Suspense with erotic and BDSM elements)

Killing Time

Killing Heartache: A Novelette (Book 1.5)

Killing Time (The Bonus Collection)

Killing Desire

Killing Me Softly

The Ties That Bind Omnibus Collection

Seasons of Love & Lust (Contemporary
Romance / Contemporary Women/ New
Adult)

A Summer to Remember

Falling for Autumn (November, 2013)

Winter's Regret (January, 2014)

Spring Fling (March, 2014)

Exploitation of Love Series

(Contemporary Romance / Contemporary Women)

Reckless Behavior: A Prequel Novella
(September, 2013)

Indecent Behavior, A Novel (October, 2013)

Undertow Trilogy (Contemporary Romance / Contemporary Women / New Adult)

Undertow

Falling Under (Coming Autumn/Winter of 2013)

Drowning in You (Monika & Dylan's story, Coming Winter of 2014)

The Atonement Series (Contemporary Romance / Contemporary Women)

Atonement, A Novel

Only Love

Only Time (Caitlyn & Liam's Story, To Be Announced)

Only You (Drew & Aubrey's Story, To Be Announced)

Crazy in Love (To Be Announced)

The Vamp Saga (Paranormal Romance , Urban Fantasy)

Mortal Death: Book I

Immortal Lair: A Novella (A Prequel to Death Wish)

Better Off Immortal: Book II

Queen of the Immortals: Book III

Immortal Dawn (Autumn/Winter, 2013)

The Vamp Saga Omnibus Collection (Reissue To Be Announced)

The Hart Family Saga (Paranormal Romance / Urban Fantasy)

Hart Attack

Troubled Hart: A Novella (Book 1.5) [To Be Announced]

Change of Hart (To Be Announced)

Superstar Marriages Novella Series (Contemporary Romance)

Lara & the City of Angels

Jenna & the City of Light (To Be Announced)

The Supernaturals Novella Series

(Paranormal Romance / Urban Fantasy)

Darkness Rising

The Dawn of Darkness

The Supernaturals Collection No. 1

Darkness Awakened

The Cloak of Darkness

The Theft of Darkness

Cling to Darkness (To Be Announced)

***The Plague (Dystopian Romance ,
Horror)***

The Beginning: Book I

Apocalypse 2013: Book II (To Be Announced)