



# RIP

GUARDIANS OF MAYHEM MC



# HOPE STONE

RIP

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# GUARDIANS OF MAYHEM MC - SANTA FE CHAPTER (BOOK 5)

# HOPE STONE

BIKERS, ALPHA MALES, TATTOOS!

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# BOOKS BY HOPE STONE

All of my books are available to read for FREE in Kindle Unlimited

## **Outlaw Souls MC Series**

Book 1 - [Ryder](#)

Book 2 - [Pin](#)

Book 3 - [Trainer](#)

Book 4 - [Blade](#)

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### **BOX SET (Books 1-6)**

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### **BOX SET (Books 7-8)**

## **Guardians Of Mayhem MC (Edgewood Chapter)**

### **BOX SET (Books 1-10)**

## **Guardians Of Mayhem MC (Santa Fe Chapter)**

Book 1 - [Gunner](#)

Book 2 - [Stunt](#)

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## ABOUT THE BOOK

MICKEY

## **Ripping up the road as the Guardian's captain is only part of my story**

I spent ten years of my life rotting away in a prison cell for a crime I didn't commit.

A man like me only wanted peace and my fishing rod.

But I got so much more in the young beauty named Peta with the flaming red curls.

I went into the animal shelter looking for a four legged friend to keep me company.

But I came out with my heart on fire and a new passion for life.

The thing is Peta's got a nightmare in her past, and in this world there's only three degrees of separation.

Will her past come flaming back to haunt her?

Or will Peta and Rip be able to overcome the odds and ride together?

**Note To Readers:** Rip is the fifth book in the newly formed Santa Fe Chapter of the Guardians of Mayhem MC. This book can be read as a stand-alone but it is recommended that you start with the [first 10-books found here in this Box Set](#).

# CHARACTER LIST

MEET THE MAIN CHARACTERS MENTIONED IN PREVIOUS BOOKS

## **Guardians of Mayhem MC Members**

**Jules "Pop" Lennox** - President  
**Charlie "Red" Vargas** - Vice President  
**Jude "Finn" Finley** - Sgt. in Arms (son of Founder, Bulldog)  
**Mitch "Axle" Jackson** - Enforcer  
**James "Hawk" Meadows** - Road Captain  
**Philip "Dutch" Whitman** - Secretary  
**Eli "Scout" Taylor** - Member  
**Hank "Havoc" James** - Member  
**Ronnie "Rush" Hawkins** - Member  
**Pete "Shadow" Stevens** - Member  
**Bobby "Funk" Morrow** - Chaplain  
**Chris "Quicks" Palmer** - Prospect  
**Duncan "Shaggy" Prince** - Prospect  
**Jason "Maverick" Hood** - Member  
**Billy "Mustang" Van Zant** - Member  
**Charlie "Gunner" Douglass** - Member  
**Jake 'Stunt' Carter** - Member  
**Michael "Mickey" Knox** - Member (nephew of Hawk)

## **The Women of GOM:**

**Melissa** - Mustang's girl  
**Chloe** – Finn's girl  
**Brody** – Red's girl  
**Penn** – Rush's girl  
**Bell** – Axle's girl  
**Ava** – Shadow's girl  
**Rosemary** - Havoc's girl  
**Dara** – Shaggy's girl

**Stephanie** - Maverick's girl

**Tabitha** - Mickey's girl

### **Former Members:**

**Frank "Bulldog" Finley:** Founder (deceased)

**Hogan "Hoagie" Smits:** Secretary (deceased)

**Tony "Fat Tony" Jordan:** Treasurer (deceased)

**Bobby "Funk" Morrow:** Chaplain (deceased)

ONE

RIP

Too many cigarette butts. I needed to clean them up, but all I could do was look at them sitting there in the ashtray. A few dishes in the sink, nothing major. It was only me in my house so I didn't see the point in fussing over it at all. I sighed as my ribs cracked and I made one of those instant coffees that never hit the spot. I was a lazy prick like that sometimes. I knew there was coffee at the clubhouse, but I had this morning habit down pat so I made my own.

I let my teaspoon clink around in my mug which had rings around the top of it from overuse. While I listened to it clink away, my phone rang. "Shit and bricks. Couldn't call later could they?" I muttered grumpily under my breath. I picked up my battered cell phone and answered the phone in a gruff manner. "Who is it? Can't I enjoy my morning cup of coffee?"

"You can go right back to your coffee once I've spoken to you. You're lucky you even get to drink coffee," a cutthroat voice answered on the other end of the line.

"Derek, what the hell do you want? We're finished, and I ain't got nothing else to say to you," I told him simply, putting my cup down as the contents splashed out onto the side of the bench. Now I was even more pissed. Not a great start to my morning.

Derek was the reason for my delay in life. The reason why I went to prison for a decade when it should have been that nefarious prick. Every time I thought of him and what happened back then it made bitterness course through my veins.

"We're finished, that's for sure, and I wanna keep it that way. This is my annual check in to make sure you remember not to say shit to nobody. You gotta get that through your head and I'm here to just keep you on the right track."

"I don't know why you're calling me. I've served my time and paid the fee I owed you and then some so don't ever think for one minute you can call my phone and do shit to me," I issued the warning back to him. Talking to him made me want to get my knife and sharpen it on his throat.

"Let's not get touchy. You just stay over there with them pitiful Guardians that you're hiding behind and mind your manners. What's left of them anyway. I hope you didn't meet too many Bubbas on the inside. You're not that big a guy." A hurricane was building and it wasn't on the outside. If I ever saw Derek again it would be too soon. I wanted nothing to do with him and that botched up robbery from years ago. It was a part of my

past that I wanted to keep deeply hidden under the floorboards never to be brought up again.

"Don't call my phone again. You're blocked from my life. We don't have any more dealings together and we won't ever." I made my point loud and clear as I pummeled my fist into the vinyl countertop making more of the tawny liquid in my cup jump out.

"Fine by me," he said with a twisted arrogance that made me hate him even more. My worn out phone clicked dead from the dial tone and my hands shook, not from being scared but from anger at this man's sheer gall to call me up after all this time. I changed my number so many times I'd lost count since I got out three years ago, but he managed to get a hold of me and I didn't know how. I looked down at my phone which was shot to shit and realized that I could do with getting a new one. Another opportunity to upgrade my phone and eliminate the murky corners of my old life. I went to prison because of that bastard. He told me I would do less time because I was younger than him. I slipped my dark brown hair behind my ear and kept drinking my coffee. He lied to me. I ended up doing ten years for a botched break-in with the sucker.

"I can't do time. I've already been in. Please. You're the one that got the lead on the house. I helped you access the other places. Please. I can't do the time. When you get out we'll pick up where we left off." He pleaded and begged me to take the fall and all because I looked up to him and he taught me the tricks of the trade. I believed him when he told me he would look out for me... I thought I would do six months and that would be it.

That was the wrong thing to do, believing him. I should have stayed away from him. We typically robbed rich houses back then. People who wouldn't miss anything and sometimes didn't even know we'd been in there. This time we got a rude shock because the family who lived in their rinky-dink high society house were home. They were sleeping in their beds and we weren't prepared with any weapons. We thought we had a clear run at the house. I didn't go all the way in. I waited on the outskirts for Derek to do his dirt.

When that light clicked on and we tried to run we got the shock of our life as the man didn't back down. He shut the doors on us and the security alarms started ringing around the house. We tried to run, tripping over the cords in the middle of their plush living room and I ran my hip into the edge of the couch. I didn't have time to cry out. I was too busy trying to get the hell out of the place.

"What the fuck are you doing in my house!" A large, bellowing voice followed us and Derek managed to get the front door open and I got to running, too. Obviously we didn't answer the man back. An imaginary knife twisted in my stomach as I recalled the stank memory. That night burned in my brain cavity for so long I knew every single step and movement that was made during the night. Derek ran like the little bitch he was and got away out the front door with me right behind him. I was up there in the bitch ranks, but we'd been caught red-handed. The slip up came because they got the plates to the car I was driving - which was stolen. I was a real menace to society back then. I grew up around criminals and I didn't do anything about it.

Derek wasn't seen, I was. The man only saw me and not Derek which made the



situation even worse. The cops came in a hurry the next morning to collect me and cart me off to jail. Derek made it clear that if I said anything about my involvement he would have to let the cops in on the details of the other robberies that I was involved in and it would be a tattle tale affair.

"You should shut your trap. I got too much dirt on you. All them times I covered you for getaways. I got the times, dates and locations. Oh yeah, don't think I forgot none. I didn't forget shit. I kept that for a rainy day, like today. How about that?" The sneering is what did me in. Like he was waiting to pin me. Derek had saved me a couple of times from being beaten up and I guessed that he thought that was enough to get me to turn myself in and do ten years for him.

Draining the dregs of my coffee I moved off from the bench holding up my weary bones, slid on my patched jacket and got ready to head to the warehouse. My Harley was waiting for me. She had a nice shiny, maroon chrome finish. Pretty much love at first sight when I saw her at the Harley Davidson store and I'd had her ever since I got out. Cost me a pretty penny, but what I never told Derek was I managed to stash some of the money from the robberies. I might have been a naive twenty something, but I wasn't that dumb about my money.

That little pocket change gave me enough to set myself up when I got outside those hellish prison walls. I picked up what I came in with which was a plastic baggie with a bunch of silver quarters in it, my Swiss army knife and two sticks of Wrigley's gum. Tried to chew it but the shit was stale and crumbled right in my doggone mouth. Spat out the cardboard real quick. Shit hot that day in Santa Fe, too. Had to hitch a ride into town which I didn't want to do. They probably thought I was a bum and truth be told I was a bum at that point.

"Where you headed?" A trucker stopped on the way as I held on tight to my canvas knapsack.

"Somewhere where I can eat for ten dollars." That's what I told him and the trucker let out a chuckle and winked with conviction.

"I got just the diner for that. You're gonna have a nice meal for eight. Hope you ain't no killer. I see you're walking from the Santa Fe prison." The trucker eyed me and cast his eyes back to the road.

I let out a hoarse chuckle. "If I was I would have already slit your throat. You're safe with me, don't worry about nothing."

I shook my head at the memories that were resurfacing to haunt me. The engine roar from my Harley started to power up as the haunting scene of past events swam around in my mind. Would take me another hour or so to get them out. This is what kept my cigarette habit lingering. I was trying to kick it, but stuff woke me up in the night and all the shit I went through in that prison fucked up what little was left of my brain.

As I moved down the street to the warehouse the nippy breeze drifted over my mustache and beard. Didn't pay for a man to be wallowing over his regrets. I needed something or someone to distract me from the anger that I feared would eat me alive. That's why I took up fishing. That kept my head level for the most part. Nothing but me and my fishing rod out there on the ocean. Nothing better than that for a man like me.

My bike rumbled into the warehouse and I parked pissed off that my morning started off with shitty interference from the past. If I could slice my hunting knife through the mess of my ten years prior then that's exactly what I would have done.

Coughing unceremoniously I killed my engine, regained my fraught breath and walked into the clubhouse to see about my boys. Mustang was rolling some bar stools into place and Stunt clapped me on the back making my shoulders roll up in tension.

"Morning Rip. Little tense there. It's just me, don't worry," he grinned. Stunt was a good one. I liked what he did on a bike. He had a lot of fancy tricks I'd never seen before and it tickled me. He was sharp and quick on the bike, as well.

"Don't worry about me, the body is creaking, breaking down and so is my mind." I rolled out the cricks in my folded over shoulders and tried to stand up straight. I wasn't a buff dude like the other guys, I was more on the slender side, the type that slipped between the cracks, but I did alright for a thirty-seven-year-old.

"You're still pretty sharp to me. You're not missing a beat," Stunt said with no idea that I was dealing with a past with a bagful of skeleton bones in 'em.

"Hmph. I need to get a dog or something. A little company would be good. A dog to tell me where the fish are in the river." I was mostly talking to myself, but the overdue sentiments were confessed out loud.

"Oh yeah? You wanna get a pet?" Mickey called out to me from the kitchen. "There's a good shelter a few miles from here. They got some sweet pups in there. Me and Tabitha went in the other week. She wants to get a cat and she roped me into going."

"That right? I'm going to have to check that place out. Got an address for it?" I was curious, I didn't know if I wanted a full grown dog or a small puppy that I had to train, might be too much of a headache to worry about.

I COULD HEAR ALL the dogs barking and yelping as I entered the animal shelter. It was the place that Mickey told me about. Fe Paws and Claws was the name and I was serious about finding a dog. I didn't have the first clue about starting to find one, but I was sure they could help me out with it.

I fumbled around at the door for a minute until a woman with a mane of flaming red hair approached me. "Hi, welcome to Fe Paws and Claws. You look like this is your first time here," she said clearly and she could see my discomfort. She held out her hand and I shook it back surprised at the warmth on the receiving end.

"Yep. It's my first time here. I heard this is a pretty good place to come if I'm looking for a dog. That true?"

I looked at her again. She was wearing a gray shirt with a slogan on it. I stared at her a little longer; Santa Fe Rumblers is what it said with a bike on it.

Was she a biker?

There was still a stunning glow to her and now I wasn't just anxious about the dog I was anxious about interacting with her. Her pale alabaster skin and blue eyes were

striking to look at and I got busted staring into her bright eyes. I had to double blink to get out of the trance I was lost in.

"Yes, it's true. Are you okay?" She touched my shoulder mistaking my mesmerized look for confusion.

"I'm fine. Just excited about finding myself a little buddy to go home with. That bike out front yours with the blue?"

"Yup, sure is." She pointed to the t-shirt and pulled it out from her chest. My day just got a little better. I pointed to my jacket with a grin letting her know we were kindred bike spirits.

Her blue eyes twinkled back at me. "Nice! Nice to meet a fellow roadie. So cool." Now the admiration and attraction level had risen to a level that was making my dick hard. Her hair was a full mass of red curls, but even better she had a wicked smile that let me know she had a little adventure in her spirit and that won me over, too. Her lips were pale and her face was naked and full of small brown freckles running across the bridge of her nose.

"Sure is. I wanna hear about," I said and quickly got the conversation back on course. "After I pick out my pet." I coughed and I didn't wanna come off too eager.

Her hands tossed her hair to the other side of her shoulder and she didn't miss a beat to what I said. "I would be excited, too, but I'm banned from having any more pets. I have a cat named Percy and I can't take them in at my apartment complex anyway. That's why I'm so happy that I work here. I wish I could take them all home." She pouted as she picked up a clipboard and handed it to me. "I'm going to get you to fill out this form to begin with and then I can show you the section where we keep stray dogs. We've had an influx in the last week so you'll have more selection. Might be a hard choice." I sat down at the table and looked up at her as she spoke.

"Wow. So does that mean there's more stray dogs on the street right now?"

"No, not necessarily. It just sometimes happens. Kind of random. There haven't been any catastrophes or anything. It just so happens that right now we have an increase in dogs. Sometimes we can go weeks without getting any. It might switch from dogs to cats and back to dogs. Depends."

"Uh-huh." I scrawled on the form that she gave me. I hated filling out these wretched forms. The least amount of paperwork that I had to do was the best for me. I didn't want anything to do with it if I could. If I was a man that could not show up anywhere paperwork wise then I would be the happiest man alive. Once I felt like I'd filled out enough of the bullcrap I handed the clipboard back to her. I got the basics down on paper and that was the main thing.

"Thank you. Come on. I'll take you through and you can meet the dogs. If you see one that pulls at your heartstrings let me know and I can bring him out and let you have more time in the meet and greet section to see how you bond." She was all smiles and red, thick hair. My brand of sexy. Her ass wasn't bad, either, it would fit right in the palm of my hand. Ah, to be young again with a physique like that.

A droll smirk came over me and I shook it off because she seemed like the smart type. The type that might not look at a washed up felon like me. My only hope to talk to her

would be the fact she was a biker like me.

TWO

## PETA

Working at the animal shelter was fulfilling for me. All these unconditionally loving creatures that didn't have homes with humans to love them. So far. That was where we stepped in. Even if they were a little broken they still came in with their frantically wagging tails and faint meows ready to give out more love. Never ceased to amaze me the love that animals had to provide to the planet.

I walked back to the desk after meeting an interesting guy. Kind of edgy, but not - and a biker. A Guardian. They were a name that was floating on the biker community's lips around Santa Fe and him coming in piqued my interest.

Dark shoulder length hair with a few reckless tattoos on his skinny arm. He wasn't beefed up or anything. Rugged, craggily face with a cute mustache and a beard, but it was his eyes. Those... They were kind, a coppery, golden color lined with wavy crow's feet that told the story of a man that had been through the ringer a time or two. That dark part of him made me want to know more. That and the fact he was coming in to love an animal. That was an instantaneous 'hit the like' button on Instagram for me. I rounded back behind the counter and started to organize the animal blankets as I thought about my own life.

My dating life was the pits, and I mean probably even darker than the pits. It was underground and if you had a flashlight you still wouldn't be able to find any jewels there. This 'swipe right' on Tinder wasn't working for me. I was a young millennial and I wanted to be a part of things, but this swiping to pick men didn't feel right to me. It felt like a carousel of humans up for auction.

"You should try online dating. Everybody is doing it. It's not a big deal, plus you can get lots of practice." Tenille, my hopeless romantic best friend thought it was a good idea for me to look on there. She's the one that helped me create my profile and she did a pretty good job. The photo I used for my profile was one of me smiling at my favorite beach spot. Likes: motorcycles, animals, smart and funny men. The problem with that smart and funny men comment was that it meant I got smart alecks in the comments who thought they were the best thing ever in life. They weren't.

I smirked with a wry shake of my head. Tenille could talk, she had a boyfriend of two years in her back pocket and if they were any closer together I would puke from the nausea of a love den they'd created together. She found love online and she

automatically assumed everyone else in the world could, too.

"Okay," was what I said stupidly leading myself to a world of disappointments, broken dates and slobos frankly. I wasn't dealing with men. I was dealing with little boys with wieners who were surfing around the internet looking for a weak spot and a chick to bang.

One of the guys I went out with insisted we meet at the skate park so he could show me how many tricks he could perform. Why the hell would I want to go to the skate park to see that? I quickly deleted him.

"Ah, what happened? I thought we were meeting up today?"

"Something came up," was my answer.

The next date I went on thought we could go for an early morning run on the Santa Fe trails at seven a.m. His profile was kind of freaky and didn't look so good. He was about ten years older than me and it asked if I was into ropes and bondage. Straight freaks. So I got off the internet in hopes that the universe would bring me someone just... normal with a touch of crazy. Not too much, just enough to keep me entertained. A normal person that was around the same age group as me and didn't think that going on a date meant going to a skate park or running at dawn when there was no light.

My friends still tried to egg me on and tell me that I hadn't given it enough time, but between the catfishing, the bad haircuts and showing up in track pants I was done and burnt out from the games of it all. Just last week we were out for ice cream having this very conversation.

"I'm so done. I cannot do it. Seriously, why do boys think sending me a dick picture is going to do it for me? I should really expose them and send it around the internet. This can't be it, can it?" I asked Tenille in frustration.

"No, it's not it. That's just those guys. I think if you maybe try another site or something. Maybe that will work," she said in an unconvincing tone. Tenille and I had been friends since we were young ones. We lived two doors up from one another and our parents were close. We even went to the same high school. She went on to university and I went on to the animal shelter and I loved her as if she were my own sister.

"Why are you stuck on this? Why can't I just meet a regular guy, like at the animal shelter?" I perched my glum face in the cradle of my hands as I pouted at my bestie.

She shrugged her shoulders. "That's a possibility, a man with a dog would be good for you. That's pretty cute. Maybe you will, who knows."

That was why when I stood back behind the counter after the guy who called himself Rip on the paperwork for short came in I balked. Maybe... He was kind of strange, but I was wondering if he was my type of strange...

I finished up late afternoon and headed back home for some R and R. After I came home from the shelter I laid on the couch for a minute. My roommate Josie was away and she was hardly ever around so mostly I felt like I lived alone.

Percy, my fat ginger colored cat came in to greet me with a loud meow and nestled himself a spot behind the back of my hamstrings on the couch. There was a card game night with the girl rider group I was a part of and I didn't want to miss it. After I felt like I'd rested for long enough I got up from the couch to shower and get ready.

I headed out back to my bike, and as soon as I saw my hard earned savings that took me a whole year to accumulate I started smiling from ear to ear. My hand smoothed down over my Honda Shadow Spirit as I ran my hand over the seat and over the handlebar curves of the vehicle. Took me some time to decide if I wanted it to be all black or not, but I chose the electric blue chrome which I thought ended up being the right choice for me. I beeped the remote garage door open and backed my majestic road warrior out.

I joined the Santa Fe Rumlbers for a number of reasons: the camaraderie, the love of bikes, supporting local charities -including the dog shelter I worked at and for a sense of fun and road adventures.

As I rode over to our meeting spot, I thought about the man named Rip from the shelter and the dog he picked. The dog had been with us as a street stray for over a month, it was so adorable and if I didn't already have a cat and two fish along with a suspicious landlord I would have taken the dog myself.

The dog had a scruffy, vagabond appearance as if it had walked a lot of miles in life. Its downtrodden face when it was brought in shaking from the rain made me sad, but the vets on site soon brought him back to life. His tail started to wag and he became one of the most loved dogs in the kennels. We were all rooting for him to find a forever home. He was good natured and played well with the other dogs. What was strange was that we didn't name him. He was a hard dog to pick a name for. Nothing seemed right and I was hoping that was because the right owner needed to come in and scoop him up.

The part I didn't like so much was keeping them inside the kennels. Yes, they got out for playtime, but there was nothing like roaming free which was what I liked to be on my bike.

I arrived at the old rec center which was a brown, brick building that was used as the Rumlbers' clubhouse and parked my bike along with the other bikes that were lined up. I walked into the clubhouse and sat my helmet down on the table as the other girls greeted me.

Michaela, Robin, Lisa, Gerry and Willow. All of the girls were awesome and we got along like a house on fire. There was no animosity or competition, just relief that like-minded women could come together and have a good time. We each had a biker name and mostly we rode for charity causes and came out for street parades to promote women riders to get on their bikes.

My biker name made a lot of sense. I was called 'Flame' due to my large messy mop of red hair that worked for me and my sometimes fiery personality. "Hey Flame! We've been waiting on you. We thought you might not show since you got beat so bad last time," Willow said with a loud chuckle at my expense.

"Hey, that's not fair, I'm pretty sure you cheated," I countered with a strong eye roll as I sat down at the table. Willow was African American and had been riding dirt bikes since she was a kid. She'd graduated to a road bike and rode a sweet Triumph in all black. Her biker name was Takeover because that was what she did when she was on the road. She always had to be out front. If anyone was our road captain it would be her. "Me cheat? Never, girl." She touched her chest with pretend shock as the other girls high fived



me and I sat down.

"What are we playing?" I asked cheerfully, excited to catch up on the gossip with the ladies.

"We're playing poker. There's still some beers in the fridge if you wanna grab one," Gerry said.

"Thanks, I'll grab one." I headed over to the fridge and picked out a beer and sat down to play with the girls. Three decks of cards were on the table and Michaela was shuffling and getting everything in order for the game. "What are we playing for? Is this real money or just having fun?" I asked.

"We are playing for fun. No gambling. You always like to make things risky don't you, Peta?" Michaela with her wild raven black hair joked.

My eyes drifted to the floor with a you-got-me look. "Hey, between the animal shelter and my disastrous date run I need to have some fun in my life."

The whole girl gang laughed at me and I laughed right along with them. "We have a charity ride coming up so maybe that will help you get some energy out," Willow advised.

"Maybee. Sometimes I wish we were badasses like that Guardians crew. I heard they got into some major shit and were shutting down crackhouses and stuff a few years back. Vigilante type stuff," I said with an animated look on my face.

Lisa clapped a hand over her mouth, she was about the same age as me and worked in retail at the Santa Fe mall. "Oh my god. I know somebody who knows one of them. I think his name is Stunt? He works in movies or something like that. That would be cool to meet them." Michaela slid her cards over to her and she looked to both sides of her to make sure nobody could see her cards.

"I mean, I don't know about the vigilante stuff, we might not be that cute riding on our bikes with guns, but if we had some cute pink bandanas that might be fun."

The crew burst out laughing again. "We are not vigilantes, we ride for charities, we help fluffy creatures and elderly people, come on now." Michaela, who was our club president, kept everybody in line.

"Would be kind of cool to meet them though," Willow scrunched her nose up and hunched her shoulders with a contrived spooky look on her face.

Michaela nodded as she dealt the cards. "Maybe we could meet them. They seem to be on the right side of the law, who knows..."

That was when I piped up. "Rip. That's the one I met today . He came into the animal shelter. Not what I expected... at all." The girls all gasped and turned their attention to me.

"Tell us more!"

"Umm, I don't know so much just that he's a dog lover. He smelled like cigarettes so I think he smokes. He was, ahhh, I don't know, interesting. Has cool eyes." I was being easy going about describing him, but there was something that rose up inside the core of me when I mentioned him. He was sexy to me and a lot older than me I could tell, but I liked his way.

"Cool eyes?" Michaela snorted. "My god that's a lame description, Peta, let's play cards."

A smile came over my face because I wished I had more to tell but the guy who bought the mongrel dog , he was a mystery to even me...

THREE

RIP

"Hmm, what am I gonna call you? Mutt? Rip the second? What? Help me out here." I was talking to my new dog who technically was a puppy, but to me he looked like a full grown dog. He was a cross with every breed known to man and his origins were unknown which was what I felt like sometimes. Origin unknown with no place to be other than the Guardians' clubhouse.

The beautiful tawny scruff ball looked at me with a head tilt and a little groan. He let out a loud bark to the names I suggested and started chasing his tail around in the living room. He was bringing a smile to my face already. I bent down with my creaky knees and tapped his wet nose.

"You, my friend, are a little bit scattered, but you're the lovable type of scattered." I massaged his ears. "You will be called Rogue. That's what I'm gonna name you. You're like me only in the four legged form." At that a long howl was released and Rogue dropped his head forward and chased his tail some more making the most noise I'd made since I'd been in the house.

"That's the one. You like that name huh? Then we'll keep it." I scratched behind his ears one more time and then I heard the piddle. "What the devil?" I looked closer as the dog whined and trotted off. He'd left a nice big puddle of piss in the middle of the floor. I stood up and put my hands behind my head. "Ahh shit. Is this how you're going to start the relationship?" I called out as the dog barked. I would have to call the shelter because this wouldn't be something I could deal with on a daily basis. My dog couldn't be pissing on my floor. I moved over to the sink and grabbed a cloth from there and started to mop up the mess.

I did purchase a firetruck red kennel for him so I planned to keep him on the outside for the majority of the day and if he stopped peeing then I would bring him on the inside. We had a hunting dog when we were young and that was how I learned to shoot, but I didn't know a thing about how to keep a pet. Once I mopped up the yellow stain on the floor I made a call.

"Hi, Fe Paws and Claws, how can I help you today?" It was the girl with the fiery hair on the other end of the line. That voice she had was unforgettable and I was pretty damn happy to hear it again.

"Hi, I think I met you last time I was in. I picked up a beautiful dog from there. I

named him Rogue, except I'm having a problem with him. He's done a few pisses on the inside of the house. Piddling a little bit. I think he's nervous. I was wondering if there was anything I could do to settle him in some."

She chuckled on the other end of the line. "Sounds like that name is fitting him well so far. I remember you. Rip right?"

"Yep. The one and only. At least I think I am around these parts. Don't let the name throw you off. I'm not Jack the Ripper or anything. I'm just good with a knife." I let the pause be there for a good long beat, but that didn't make it any better. In fact, it made it worse. "That didn't sound so good, either, did it? I'm into fishing, that's how I meant it." Frightening her was the last thing I wanted to do, but she didn't look like a lady that scared too easily.

"I think I know what you meant. It's cool. How about we go for a walk with your dog at the Santa Fe dog park? Let's see how Rogue does with some of the other dogs, we can check if he's nervous or anything. Might just be he was excited to be in his new home. If you get him into a habit of going outside and sending him to a spot, he won't do that anymore. You have to be the pack leader. You have to show him what to do."

"Okay, I'm going to have to try that. Pack leader. I can do that. Let's see about it, Rogue." I scratched Rogue over the back of his fur and he stuck his nose into my leg. "That sounds about right for the dog park. I need to get him out and give his legs a run. How about eight a.m? That work for ya?" I asked as Rogue trotted off to go sniff out something in the back room.

"That's a little too early for me. How about ten a.m., that's when all the other dogs are normally at the park. Some of these dogs include the ones we've adopted out to other owners so it would be good to see them again, too."

"Sure. I'll meet you then. Look forward to it. Thanks for your help, Peta." She was a knowledgeable one in the land of dogs and she was smoking hot, too. That all helped. I had another agenda, too. I wanted to talk to her about that Honda Shadow she had and what it could do. Maybe, just maybe I could coax her to go on a ride with me .

"HANG ON, let me untangle you, Rogue! Lemme me get this leash out from under your paw. Come on now." Rogue was whimpering and his tail had got to going to and fro, he was excited to meet with the other dogs. I was at the Santa Fe dog park and the morning breeze was a nice offset to the glaring heat of the Santa Fe sun. I saw her hair before I saw anything. The young lady from the animal shelter was making her way across the park to me. She was wearing a colorful hoodie, nice tight jeans that showed off her legs and a big smile on her freckled face.

"You laughing at my tangled mess of a dog?" I asked lightly.

"No, I'm laughing at Rogue. He always wants to play. He likes to be amongst his friends. It's safe to let him off the leash. He's a socialized dog. We had enough time to do that with him. The last owner must have done a little bit of work with him already, too,

because he was pretty good.”

“I’m lucky the last owner gave him up because now I have him. I hope he was treated well by them.” I stroked Rogue’s fur as he yapped at me. He was speaking in some sort of dog code and it was working on me.

She lifted a hand to her mass of stunning red curls as I squinted an eye at her taking in her beauty. Rogue did just like she said as the other dogs jumped and played with one another like old friends. There was no animosity just butt sniffing, friendly hellos and nice owners who waved at me. I waved right back. “Looks like you’re right. Old Rogue is doing pretty good. He’s a good dog. Pretty hyper but we’re having a good time.” I took a moment to admire her and take her in.

“I know your name and I don’t know yours. That’s rude of me. What’s yours, sweetheart?”

“Peta. My name is Peta. I probably didn’t even tell you at the shelter. My bad.” She held out her hand and I shook it again like I did at the shelter. There was a warm buzz that hummed through her fingers and it made me hang on a little longer than I should have. I pulled back waiting for the tingles to subside from my fingers.

“Peta.” I let her name roll off my tongue. “That’s different.”

“Yep. It is. Spelled Peta. Not Peter.” We strolled together as I watched Rogue and the other dogs playing together.

“Got it, got it. How long have you been working at the shelter?”

“Going on four years now.”

“Four years? That’s a long time. You must get a lot of satisfaction from taking care of them.”

“I do, can be trying at times, but I do like it a lot.”

“It’s a good thing you like your job, nothing worse than being in a job you hate.”

Peta looked at me as we walked. “You don’t hate your job, though, do you?”

“No. I’m a Guardian, bodyguard - that’s a new role for me and a mechanic when I need to be. I’m with a good bunch of men. I wasn’t always, but these guys are pretty good.”

She didn't ask questions. She just kept walking alongside me and changed the subject. “Any other issues with Rogue? I think you just need to run him. Make sure he gets a lot of exercise. I think somewhere in all of those breeds he has, has something that makes him need to run.”

“Makes sense. Will get me out for exercise, too, and that’s a good thing. I’m not much into it. I prefer to get on my bike and ride.”

Her pale skin seemed to come alive when she smiled and made her even more appealing to me. “Fair enough, but I think Rogue will change all of that for you.”

“I’m thinking he will, too.”

WHEN I TOLD Peta I loved my job at the Guardians I meant it. We were expanding and I

was helping Mustang move more bar stools into the space. "This place is really getting going, ain't it?" I mentioned as I looked around at the twenty extra chairs and upright tables we'd added.

"Sure is. We're still holding with the cars but this is where the bread and butter is right now so we have to double down on it and keep going."

"I agree. Let's get them in here and drinking. You still thinking about getting Mickey's girlfriend Tabitha in here to perform?"

"Yep. They are going to be here in the next few weeks. They're pretty big now so they will draw a crowd. I don't know if right now we have the facilities to take them on board. We need a few weeks to get a stage ready and set up a dancefloor." Mustang looked overwhelmed as he spoke about the venture.

"How are you going as president? Are you holding up alright?" I chewed off one of my fingernails and looked at it.

"I could use some help up in here. We need a secretary or something. Scout can't keep stepping in, he's working to find new property developments for the club."

"Welp, I'll keep an ear to the ground about it."

"That would be good. I could use all the help I can get right now."

And so the afternoon went. As the day turned over I kicked around talking trash to Mickey and Stunt. "You got rid of them cigarettes yet, Rip?" Stunt poked at me.

"Ah, you know what... I think..." I paused for a minute and broke out into a smoker's cough.

"Right. I see you haven't. You should come running with me and doing some stunts on the track. We'll kick that habit right out of you." Stunt had been pushing and prodding at me for the last few weeks, but there was no point.

"I would rather have my dog Rogue run me around in ten circles and get my legs hog tied than to get on that dirt track and do all them stunts that you do. I ain't doing a goddamn thing that's for sure." I made my point plain and clear as the water ran out of our faucet.

Stunt chuckled and threw an air punch at me. "Still gotta stop smoking, we need ya here."

"I will. In my own good time. I got a few things on my mind that's making that damn hard to do." Derek was one of those things and I was still wondering how the hellhound got my new number. He must have fished around in bars for it. Pretty much most people in Santa Fe that ran in biker circles knew about me.

As the time rolled on the warehouse transformed to the party bar. I wasn't on the door for the night, Breaker and Gunner were the ones doing the heavy lifting as the gatekeepers.

A nice classic easy rock song was playing in the background and making me feel loose as I tapped my foot on the floor. The ladies and the fellas started to roll right into the bar and I looked at the stream of people. I knew that we had something special at the bar that we were building. We didn't advertise, yet the good people of Santa Fe still managed to find us.

The crowd was in full swing by eight p.m. A few ladies were at the bar and I noticed

they were wearing a lot less than other patrons, it was hard not to see all the flesh hanging out. One of them was a blonde or at least she looked like a blonde at first glance. She had a fringe and long platinum hair which could have been a wig on second glance. From the looks of her hoo-has it appeared she'd had some surgery done. Those things were sitting up high like balloons and threatening to spill out of the too tight top she had them squeezed into. I was afraid that the guy she was talking to was about to experience a nip slip from her. She was more than cringe-worthy to watch.

She was flirting hard and I saw her flick a card to the guy which made me hyper aware of her. I looked at the woman next to her. She was dressed with a skin tight skirt and a white tube top which she kept hiking up. If the guy who was whispering sweet nothings in her ear moved in any closer to her, her top would have easily exposed her straining breasts underneath it. Next to her in the seat was another woman with dark brown hair and her hand on a biker's leg. The guy had on a bandana and he was older. He had a mousy brown beard and one of those classic handlebar mustaches with a small tattoo on his neck. She was stroking his thigh back and forth and dangerously close to the top part of his inner thigh and that's when I heard the words that matched up to what I thought was going on.

"How do you like it big daddy? Do you want the full service or just a little mouth action?" I walked over to break up the action.

I stood right where she was and coughed over the music as Mickey stole a long look at me from the bar. "How would you like it if I kicked you out of this bar right now for prostitution?" I put my mouth to her ear and she jerked back surprised that I'd caught onto her.

The man looked shocked as he held up his half full beer. "I was just sitting here drinking my beer. She came up to me," he said shaking his head.

"Yeah, but you entertained her," I said as I cut my eyes at him.

I proceeded to grab her by the elbow and she gave me a foul look which exposed a couple of knocked in teeth. "Getcha hands offa me. I know how to walk."

"I bet you do. Now take your friends with you. We don't do that in this bar. If someone wants to sleep with you there ain't gonna be no dollars involved on my watch." Her eyes rolled at me.

"You're fucking up my money. Couldn't just have a little fun. Would have been happy to give you a cut, but you had to fuck it up," she snarled at me.

"You weren't about to give me a cut and you know it. You and your girl crew need to get out of here and take it somewhere else."

"Where else can we take it huh? We got cut off from the Violet bar, too." I raised my eyebrows at her telling me her story.

"I'm sure there's plenty of other street corners you can get on. Move on outta here," I told her as Mustang and Breaker looked on at me with curiosity.

"What's going on?" Mustang asked as his pupils shone through with a look of discomfort etched in.

"We got ourselves a few pros that think it's okay to use our turf to find clients," I clarified.



"Oh, they think so huh?" Breaker asked. "We got anymore on the inside?" I nodded.

"Yep, the one at the bar with the platinum hair and the brunette. Might wanna check that one. I'm not sure," I confirmed. Breaker made a move from the bar as I let go of the one I had.

"What's your name?" I asked her. I didn't want to give her a hard time for what she was doing. It was up to her what she chose to do with her body. I just didn't want it happening on our turf and I knew Mustang didn't want that, either.

"Rachael. My street name is Ray Ray. Not the most original but normally it does the job." Her arms were crossed over her enormous breasts which were hard to unsee. I almost felt like if I had a pin to prick them they would deflate. I smirked on the inside at my thoughts. Breaker went in and retrieved the other two out of the bar.

"Got your two little friends. If all of you could have just sat there and had a drink it would have been fine, but you had to take it there." The three of them bundled together and started hissing like vipers.

"Tell us what to do! If they wanted to come home with us that's none of your freaking business," one of them said in a raised voice. "If you let us go I would have given you a discount, you look like a good ride." She turned up her sultry dial ten notches as Breaker stood back from her and coughed with a hard frown.

"Can't we work out a deal?" one of them whined as I shivered in my jacket. I knew if I was cold that they had to be, too. The way they were talking made me think business was rough and I didn't know why because they had enough appeal to get the job done at least. Not my brand of tea, but if there wasn't a need for it they wouldn't be working. I watched the women to see what they were going to do. They couldn't go back inside, so the best thing for them to do was leave.

"Nope. We can't work out anything. You gotta call a taxi and go now." Breaker spoke with authority and let them know we weren't about that.

I watched as one of them rolled their eyes in the night and made the call on their phone for the taxi.

Me, Breaker and Mustang all stood in a line waiting for their taxi as we watched them getting in. As soon as they were on their way I smirked at the guys. "Least it wasn't the Vipers this time."

Breaker rubbed his bald head. "Yep, better than the Vipers. I can see why they're not getting any work," he mumbled as his boots crunched with gravel underfoot back to the front door. All of them looked a little worse for wear in the street light and as I looked at them again I could tell they'd been in the trade for a long time and they looked like they had some mileage on the clock. I felt a little sorry for them. They were just trying to make a buck, but they weren't about to make it on the Guardians' watch.

"I got a feeling they will be back. They might be a little slicker with their disguises. I don't think that was their real hair for some reason."

"No, it probably wasn't their real hair. I'm pretty sure the platinum blonde had different colored hair underneath there. Her wig was kind of lopsided when she got in the taxi."

Mustang shook his head several times. "Women. Oh well. I think we're clear now."

Nothing to worry about.”

“Easy night. One of the easier disputes we’ve had to resolve in a while,” I observed as I spoke to Mustang.

“You got that right.” He crossed his arms and sighed looking up to the Santa Fe night sky. All part and parcel of the Guardians’ work.

FOUR

## PETA

Rip called again and I thought it might be about his dog, but it wasn't. It was to ask me out. I was seated at the front desk of the animal shelter taking care of reception and we were having a slow period. I was enjoying the peace and quiet when my cell phone brought me back from my daydream and into the present world.

"Hey Peta. I might be a little forward in asking this... but I enjoyed our dog walk and I wanted to know if you would like to take another one? Rogue is doing better by the way."

"That's great to hear." I'd worked with Rogue and he was a fast learner and a good dog. I found that when I saw him in the park with Rip that I missed that wet, black nose nestling on my lap looking for attention, and not forgetting those floppy ears that folded over when he was jumping around too much.

"I'm free on Saturday, I have the day off," I told him and a little patter in my chest fluttered for a moment.

Did I actually like this guy? I couldn't be sure, I was young and I was getting sick of the whole dating business thing already even though I had Tinder options to go out on dates for the next couple of weeks if I wanted to.

"Saturday at eleven okay?" His voice had this rough, caustic edge to it that I liked. It made me want to put the phone closer to my ear.

"Yep. Fine by me." A date from the biker guy, so random and unexpected from him.

"Great, see you then. I can hear the animals in the background. You must be at work."

"Yep. You guessed it. Oops, I have someone coming in so I better go. I'm going to see you on Saturday."

"Sure, have fun." He hung up the phone and I greeted the new people coming into the shelter. I didn't have time to absorb the conversation because maybe if I did have time I would have canceled.

"Hi guys, welcome to Fe Paws and Claws, how can I help you today?"

"Hi, we're looking to add a cat to the family. Can you help us?"

"Sure..."

SATURDAY CAME and I didn't spend too long in the mirror. I didn't want him to think it

was a date. I wanted to hang out with him and get to know this mysterious biker. I hated being late for things; it meant I would come in flustered and over eager. I already had red hair and I didn't want flaming red cheeks to match. My skin annoyed me at times. I lived in Santa Fe and most people got the blessing of having golden skin when the sun shone on them. Not me, I got this pale English rose type of skin that originated from my mother who was also a redhead. Things didn't fit because I wasn't English. I was born and bred in Santa Fe and so were my parents.

I pulled my bike out, ran a cloth over her and made my way to the dog park. The sun was out already and casting an easy glow on the grassy oval. A few owners were out early with their pooches and they waved to me. I knew most of them. I stood in the middle looking up at the sky. Santa Fe was wearing a clear blue sky and it was a great day for a dog walk. I sucked in a deep breath enjoying the oxygen and looked down at my watch. The time read nine a.m. I was really early. I found a bench on the side and pulled my book out of my bag. I thought I would be waiting for a long time but I got a rude awakening.

"You're an early bird, too. Nice." I jumped and the book ascended out of my hands as I scrambled to grab it out of the air. I lost the air tussle and my book fell to the ground.

Rip was behind me and laughing hard. "Gotcha. Snuck up there. I didn't mean to scare you, but that was pretty funny." His hand was cupped over his mouth as he grinned and coughed at the same time. Rogue obviously enjoyed the scare, too, because he started barking and let out a howl afterwards.

I turned to him with my curls flying around my face with a look of incredulity. "You!" I waved my finger at him as I gathered up my book and shoved it back into my raffia bag. I could see how funny it was, too, and let him have his scary introduction. Rogue's nose found my lap like he used to at the shelter and the initial shock of fright left me as I turned to mush and patted Rogue on his furry head.

"He missed you," Rip said sweetly. He didn't look half bad, the more I saw him the more he grew on me, but I was still wary of him. There were dark corners I could feel in him and I wanted to know what they contained. He appeared to be a friendly easy going guy, but I could tell there was more to him than meets the eye.

"I miss him, too. How's the peeing going?" I asked him attempting to find common ground.

"He's doing better. He's getting the hang of going out. I'll get him there. Thanks for the tips."

"You're welcome. I came early -" My phone started to ring in the middle of my sentence. Fishing around in my bag I retrieved my phone and answered it.

"Hello?"

"Hey girl! I know it's late notice, but we were thinking of organizing a ride. Do you wanna come in to the clubroom for a quick minute, if you're free? We're down here now." Willow was on the other end of the line. My eyes scanned up to Rip who was waiting for what I had to say.

I covered the phone with a wide grin. "Wanna ride with me to meet some cool biker chicks?" Rip looked confused for a minute and then hunched his shoulders.

"Sure, why not? I'm here meeting one, I can meet the others."

"I know it's on the spot, but they want to meet you." I still had the phone covered and Willow was the impatient type. If I didn't answer in the next twenty seconds she would most likely hang up on me and then ring back again.

"They wanna meet me? They don't even know me. You been talking about me to them?"

I picked a curl to hide my finger in and twirled it around my finger. "I was telling them about the biker who came in and picked up Rogue. So yeah, I might have mentioned you both. We're hard core biker chicks! Of course we wanna know about the bikers here. The reputation of the Guardians in Santa Fe is buzzing around town. We want to know if the reputation is true."

Rip became more interested then. "Oh yeah? What kind of reputation are we earning? This I gotta hear."

"Just that you're pretty bad ass, you were household names for a little while when that meth house crackdown was going on in Edgewood."

Rip nodded. "I wasn't part of the Guardians then, but that was something I heard, too. Hard to miss. Edgewood was a piece of shit place for a while there until they cleaned it up. They did a great job and we have that region covered." Rip's thin lips grew to a full smile. "Yeah, we rock. You're right. Okay, let me meet your biker crew. I wanna see their bikes, too. If yours was anything to go by I'm sure I'm going to be impressed." Rogue sat dutifully by his owner as we worked out the semantics. I was floored. I hadn't seen Rogue so calm before. He had a lot of hyper energy and for him to sit like that with his mouth open so wide he could have caught a few flies.

"He's sitting like that? What are you, the dog whisperer now?" I exclaimed as Rogue barked but stayed in place.

"I've been watching that Caesar guy. That one you're talking about. He tells you how to be a pack leader. I guess that helped me out a little, it's working. He's not hard to train. I'm glad I got him. He's my guy." Rip bent down and kissed the top of Rogue's head as his tongue hung out panting from the walk. Rip was turning out to be not what I thought he was. He was thoughtful and sweet.

"Okay, follow me." I rose up from the bench and we made it over to my bike which was parked conveniently behind his car. My helmet went on over my red mane of curls flattening them as I hitched my leg over my bike and we rode over to the Fe Rumlbers' meeting spot.

Robin, Lisa and Gerry's bikes were sitting outside the brick building and I saw one car that looked like Michaela's. Rip got out of the car and brought Rogue with him who looked happy enough wagging his tail and following in line with his master. "Nice bikes. I like the pink chrome on that one." He pointed to Robin's Triumph classic, she'd had a custom pink chrome designed for her and when both of our bikes sat together they looked pretty sweet together.

"That's Robin Hood. That's her biker name. Not original, but it goes with her name so that's what she got."

Rip let out a low whistle. "Does she rob from the rich and feed the poor?" He chuckled

and I grinned back at him. His checkpoints were going up. He had a sense of humor about things, but the worn look on his face showed me something else.

"She doesn't do that. She does support the poor. We do charity rides so there's that."

"Why didn't you say so! We should get our clubs together and do a little ride out. That's good for Santa Fe. A little camaraderie between the sexes."

"You will love Michaela, she's the president and she would be so happy to do that. We've been trying to come up with new ideas on how to get people involved." Now there was excitement, that little suggestion we came up with at the last meeting was becoming a reality.

The girls looked out the door as I walked in with a man and a dog. There was an instant silence from the light chatter as their eyes scanned over both of us. "Mmm. What's going on here?" Gerry, one of the ladies who was in her thirties said.

"This, ladies..." I opened my palms as if Rip was the main dish. "Is a Guardian. You asked so I have delivered." The ladies giggled at my presentation and Rip flashed me a dubious look.

"Welp, with that opening I don't know that it needs a follow up. I'm Rip and I'm from the Guardians. I heard that you ladies do charity rides," he opened with as he relaxed and spoke to them.

"And you have a cute doggie. Oh my god. He's so sweet." Rogue dipped his head for a pat as Lisa dropped in to smooth her hand over Rogue's fur.

"He loves that. He will lap up all the pats there are from you," Rip chuckled. The girls paid attention to the dog for a while forgetting about Rip's statement referring to the charity rides.

Michaela didn't miss a beat though. "Yes, the charity rides. We have them coming up soon and we're deciding out of five charities which one to support."

Rip's face displayed contemplation. "Would you consider teaming up with the Guardians? I have to run it by the president- Mustang, but I'm sure he would be keen to work with an all girl bike group, we could get something going together. What do you think?"

"I think that's a brilliant idea. Ladies?" All came back with a unified yes as Rip made himself comfortable and the ladies started asking him a million and one questions about what it was like to be a Guardian. We spent a good forty- five minutes of the morning all getting to know everyone and I discovered that Rip was good at holding a conversation and he could talk freely amongst us and nothing felt weird.

"Do you guys do illegal activities? Are you a real badass crew?" Willow asked as she folded her arms over the top of the table and leaned forward and from the glint in her eye I could tell she was hoping for something juicy.

"We are the people's champions. We have to, to sustain ourselves and support the community. Sometimes that line gets a little hairy."

"Ooooh, that sounds like you do some underhanded shit. I read between the lines on that one. You're not fooling me." Willow narrowed her eyes a little bit as Rip stuck out his hand for a fist bump from her. She played along with him as he winked in response to her calling him out.

"We do what we gotta do, that's life."

"Sure enough is," Willow commented.

"Well, I for one am glad that special team the Guardians had cut that meth shit out. It was starting to seep into Santa Fe, and we were starting to get a lot of bums hanging around the rec center, and we thought we might have to find another spot."

"Yep. I remember. I had to take my hunting knife with me. I had one of 'em trying to steal my bike and I caught him right in the act. He was standing around my bike and high as a kite. That was one of many stories. I've never asked the boys too much about it, but you can ask them firsthand when you see them."

Rip made a call on the spot and cleared the date for the following week for us to come and meet the crew.

"Look at that, ladies. We got ourselves a biker date. Can't wait to see you all there."

ALL SASS and giggles was how we showed up to the Guardians' clubhouse the following week. We all were looking around the place like lost lambs. Michaela and Robin were whispering as one of the most well built men I'd ever seen in my life marched toward us with a grin on his face. He was hot - if you liked the terminator type of look. Rip looked like a skinny rake next to him.

"Nice of you ladies to come through. I'm Mustang, I'm the president of the Guardians. You've all met Rip, our road captain. Come in, the old ladies of the tribe are here, too. Most of the guys from the Edgewood chapter are floating around here, as well." We followed them both in as Michaela elbowed me and her eyes looked as if they might gobble Mustang up.

"Look at the butt on him! He is so fine. Where are we? Buff heaven?" she said and I almost wanted to smile until I spotted a few ladies on the inside giving us steely looks.

"Uh-oh. I don't think you should get too happy about that." A lady who looked like a female Tarzan had her arms crossed and she was standing next to a replica of Mustang who walked us in.

She was the first one of the frosty women to speak to us. "Ah, the Santa Fe Rumlbers. There won't be any rumbling here, but welcome." She held out her strong looking hand to me because I was the closest and I wished I wasn't. I took it, though, and she gave it a squeeze making my fingers glue together. I pulled back as quickly as possible and shook my hand out as her piercing eyes smirked from my momentary pain. "Sorry. A little strong for a girl like you."

I frowned at her for the hostility she was oozing as the big man beside her came over the top of her to shake my hand, too, while the others were greeted by some of the other Guardian crew.

"My wife is a little grumpy today. She's nice most times. I'm Axle." He had a beautiful smile, but in looking closer in his eyes they were deep and dark letting me know he wasn't someone you would want to play with. These guys were bad asses for real and



everything about them screamed danger if you were on the wrong side of them.

I took his hand accepting his apology. I was able to sneak a look at her without her looking at me. With her lean physique and dark eyes she didn't look like anyone you wanted to mess with, either. "It's fine," was my reply as I shifted my eyes to look around the length of the bar. I saw a couple of people with drinks in their hands playing on what looked like an old school pinball machine and my discomfort turned to a huge smile.

"Is that a pinball machine? That is so retro. Very cool!"

"Sure is, that was Mickey's idea if I remember correctly."

The lady with the strong grip brought me back to the conversation. "I'm Bell Marco. Nice to meet you. That was a little rude of me." Her husband squeezed her hand as he smiled at her.

"We came because Rip invited us to the bar, we ride bikes, as well," I said trying to appease her and get her to calm down some.

"I know he did. Welcome to the bar," she said with a little less sharpness in her tone.

Another lady with short cropped blonde hair that was kind of spiky came over. She was wearing leather pants and a guy with floppy hair and a nice smile headed over to greet us. He spoke up first while his girlfriend assessed me from top to toe. "We got the Santa Fe Rumblers in the house. How is this?" His poking fun was good natured and he held out a limp hand for me to shake. His greeting made me feel at ease along with his girlfriend's smile.

Phew, not all of them were intimidating. I stole a glance at the others and wondered if they were having the same experience or if it was only me with the intimidation factor. I didn't have time to look at who they were talking to, but I figured they might have been under fire like me.

The bar was open and decent music was giving the place a nice kick back vibe despite the frosty opening. "We were invited, we wanted to check out what your warehouse was like and see if you wanted to team up with us. That's our president over there - Michaela. We do charity rides and community stuff mainly." I pointed in the direction of Michaela who was waving her hands around and looked super excited in talking to the guy named Mustang. Meanwhile I was feeling caged in and wanting to get a drink to calm my nerves.

"I'm Shaggy by the way. Do you want a drink? I'm going to get one myself. My hands are empty. I wanna hear about this charity ride thing."

"Nice to meet you, Shaggy. Yep, a drink would be great. Do you have beer here? I'm feeling pretty thirsty." I knocked the knot down my throat as I diverted my eyes to safer places around the clubhouse. It was nothing like our little space. It was elaborate and from what I could see had a camera in each corner.

"Yep. Is what's on tap okay?"

"Yep, that's not a problem. Thank you."

Bell kept watching me out of the corner of her eye and another kind of hippie- looking woman came over. She was wearing a jacket and she looked less like she wanted to burn me at the stake, but I couldn't be sure because her face was neutral. I figured if she was one of those Boho chicks she wouldn't be trying to take me out anytime soon.

"Hi, I'm Brody. I'm the Vice President's partner- Red. He's floating around

somewhere." Her voice was flat and there was a thick, weird tension in the air. Now I had two of them looking at me and only one who was friendly.

"Nice to meet you, Brody. I'm Peta. I work at an animal shelter not too far from here. Rip came in and picked up a dog from us." My eyes lit up as I mentioned Rogue's name, both of them together were a perfect fit.

"Ah, I get it. Cool. So, what's up with this charity ride? Where is the money going and who collects it?" She crossed her arms and hiked an eyebrow at me. Now it was becoming clear that they thought we were imposters or scammers or something like that.

I put my hands up in self defense as Shaggy came back with a beer in his hands along with two others. If I didn't help him out with taking one off his hands it looked like he might drop them. The beer couldn't have come at a better time. I needed a reprieve from the microscopic scrutiny I was under.

"Whoa. We aren't doing anything illegal if that's what you think. One of the places is Fe Paws and Claws where I work. The money has helped us expand and buy new kennels for stray cats and dogs. I'm not sure why you would think I would do something like that." My eyes flashed with annoyance as I released the words with a little venom. I didn't come into the Guardians' clubhouse to be intimidated, especially when we looked up to them as a club and wanted to work with them. I took one of the beers out of Shaggy's hands and thanked him.

Brody jutted out her lip. "Oh, sorry. That came across a little harsh. We've had a lot of trouble here at the bar with people we've trusted and let , so, you know, we can get a little protective. My apologies again. That sounds cool actually." Her enthusiasm about the charity ride shone through and I sipped a little of my beer feeling like things might be calming down.

FINALLY AN EXPLANATION as Rip came over to join us. He had a smile on his long, angular face. "I think we might have a winner. I think we might have a ride going on." I took a long sip of my beer and my blue eyes floated up and met the wrath of the dark haired Amazon looking woman.

"That is interesting," she added with a touch of sarcasm.

"Bell," Axle growled beside her. "Come on, you need a drink. Don't scare our guests. You're being silly." Both of them left me with my mouth parted. Getting on the wrong side of that woman wouldn't be the best idea for anyone, but I didn't know what I'd done in the first place. I was starting to feel like it was best that we leave.

Shaggy and Rip chuckled with a head nod as they dove into their beers. "That's Bell for ya."

Rip put an arm around my shoulder. "Bell can get a little touchy with guests. She's an honorary member of the Guardians and a former enforcer of another crew. Don't worry about it. She'll come around eventually. Don't take it personally." My slight movement away from him made him give me a second look as I felt myself getting angry at his dismissiveness.

"Eventually? I don't see why not now. We don't have any negative plans toward the Guardians," I huffed.

"No, you might not." He looked sideways at me and he could tell I was upset. "Sorry about her. I am. Don't worry about her, please don't. I didn't mean to be so flippant about it." The touching look he gave me made me soften a little bit. "Looks like you're finishing that drink mighty fast. Wanna come to the bar for another one? I'll show you the pinball machine." I followed in step with Rip.

I left Rip's reply alone and asked other questions so we could stay on the right track. "Do you make your money from the bar mainly?"

Rip nodded as he slid his dark hair behind his ear. "Yep. We do and we have commercial real estate properties, as well. That's what gave us the opportunity to open this chapter."

"Very cool."

"Sure is. Like you." Oh, he was flirting. I didn't know if I even wanted to date him yet.

"Thanks," I said.

"Are you seeing anybody right now, Peta?" Rip asked as he held up two fingers to the young guy behind the bar.

"No one in particular. Why?"

"I wanted to know if you wanna hook up and go out another time together without Rogue?" I could feel myself tensing up, just because I wasn't 100% percent sure. Rip did the whole stretch out your arm trick and tried to put it around my shoulders. I ducked away from him and he looked shocked. He must have thought he had it in the bag, but given the introduction to the Guardians that he just gave me and a few other reasons I definitely wasn't sure.

"I don't know about that." I wanted to say more as I looked at him, but the shock gave way to a slow head nod. He didn't seem that disturbed by my answer.

"Friends then at least?" he asked as he handed me another beer.

"That I can do," I agreed as he held his plastic cup up to hit mine.

FIVE

RIP

Peta, the young beauty with the red hair made me feel alive inside. She was bringing back that old spark I used to have before my life started to travel downhill, but come to think of it, my life before jail was reckless. I raised my eyebrows as I thought about my life. I was up for the chase. She said no, but I took that as a not yet in terms of us going on a date. I think Rogue agreed with me.

"What do you think, Rogue? Do you think Peta will go out with me in the future?" Rogue made a gurgling noise in his throat as his ears perked up at my voice. He trotted over to the kitchen and put his nose down to his bowl nudging it forward. Chuckling at his huge appetite I shook my head and ruffled his fur. I opened up the long cabinet door and pulled out his treats pouring some into the bowl. "I guess that's my answer. Have to wait and see, huh?"

Rogue woofed and proceeded to devour the snacks that I put down in front of him. I bent down to him and looked at his cute little face, wondering how I survived all these years without him. I thought it best to leave him alone while he ate, I know I didn't like being messed with when I was eating so I left him to his treats. Not much was going on at the clubhouse and it was the middle of the day.

Things had changed for the Guardians and now I found myself working more at night with the bar. The mechanics side of the business had slowed down for the club during the day. That left a gaping hole and an opportunity for me to get back to one of my favorite hobbies; fishing.

Life was pretty good around all the bases. I had a new girl to chase, and chasing tail used to be a pastime of mine. I was a little sharper back then and my body was a little more in shape, but as it stood my stomach was at least flat. This time the girl was one that I saw might be a keeper and not a throwback like some of the fish I had to throw back in the sea in the past.

Whistling along the way I took my little wiry body to the garage and found my fishing rod and my plastic bags that I often used to put my bait in. I liked to use live bait and since there was a fishing shack right near the edge of the fishing hole I figured that would do the trick. Santa Fe had all the right rivers for what I liked. In those fresh flowing waters was some nice brown and rainbow trout that loved the rivers and the rapids we had. If I got lucky I could catch myself some good Small Mouth Bass or Northern Pike, but

it depended on which way the river flowed.

I changed into my fishing gear, grabbed my rod from the back and brought it into the living room while Rogue looked at me as if I was an alien. He didn't know what the hell I was doing, but he was about to be taken on his first fishing expedition and I knew he would like it.

I set up my back pack and got all my equipment situated. I put his leash on and he happily started wagging his tail thinking we were going for a walk. He was easy to please. Once I had everything I needed I packed Rogue into the car but not before he did some showy 360 degree turns as I made my way out the door.

I stuffed all the things inside and got behind the wheel ready for a nice day of fishing and a night rendezvous at the club. I had this nice little spot that was an hour out of Santa Fe that was plentiful with the fish. It was a place I'd been going to for a long time. It gave me peace to look at the brown, jagged rocks. I could marvel at the world's foundation and the green- blue water that ran through it for hours. Fishing gave me a chance to work through things and work things out within myself.

I pulled up to the spot and parked my car. I got out and went over to the bait shop and there was Clive standing tall and true with his bald head and the few wisps that he didn't want to let go of.

"Hey there Rip. Fancy seeing you here in the middle of the day. Nice to see you here. You ready to fish? The river is running clean today and I think you're going to have plenty of fish with your name on it. I've had a lot of fishermen catching everything under the Santa Fe sun, I think you're going to have a good day." He nodded his head up and down. Next to me on the leash was Rogue. I was a little nervous about what he would do when I started to fish. I wanted to know if he would chill beside me and just stay where I could see him. The only way to find out was to bring him to the water and see for myself. I didn't even know if my furry friend could swim. Probably a question I should have asked Peta, but sometimes you just gotta roll with things.

"I sure am. This here is Rogue. I picked him up a couple of weeks ago. He's real sweet and it's going to be his first time out here on the water." I ran my knuckles over the back of his short fur and Rogue closed his eyes sleepily in appreciation for the pats.

"He'll be just fine. If he's anything like mine, he'll sniff around with them yellow flowers around the edges and then get back to the water and watch you. Let me know how it goes. If he don't respond well you can bring him in here and I'll keep watch of him. You'll be alright."

"Thank you, that would be great, Clive. Just give me the usual. Let's see what we can do here. I need some fish so I can keep my knife active."

"You know how to cut them fish clean with no bones. I don't know how you sit there and do that, but I admire it. That there is a real skill." Clive was talking about my true abilities with a knife. I could gut fish and make a really good meal out of it. I knew how to pick the bones out just right so nobody got them suckers stuck in their teeth.

"It's taken years, but I think I've got it mastered now."

"You got it alright." Clive weighed my bait and handed me the mix. "Here you go." I took it and headed out to the spot. I felt at ease as soon as I moved over to the river.

The rushing sound of the brook, and with one inhale of breath I felt like I was home. It was a world away from anything.

A single thought came in that I would want to bring Peta to the river to experience the calm and peace of it. It was a hell of a place and not too many people knew about it unless they had an obsession with fishing like I did.

Rogue followed me and stayed calm the whole way. He watched every move I made from putting the bait on the hook to me sitting near the river and casting the line. As I threw it out I watched as it hit the river. Then the wait happened.

The solitude and the beauty of the landscape was enough for me. Rogue didn't move a muscle, his eyes just looked around taking in the scene. "Atta boy, Rogue. You see them fish in the water?" I asked the question sure that he could hear me. His floppy ears perked up as I pointed my finger to a shallow point in the water where I could see the fish myself. That shit made me excited. He looked at me and barked. "Yep, that's right. That's dinner right there."

"Talking to the fish again? Is that what you're doing?" The sound of the voice sent a chill rippling down my spine. It was one that I knew all too well. It was a man who used to join me fishing with his own dog. Back when we were friends and robbers in crime.

"Derek, what the fuck are you doing at my spot? Get the hell on," I growled through gritted teeth. Even Rogue stood up on all four paws as he growled low in his throat, too. That let me know that Rogue was on my side. Derek came into my line of sight and I looked over at him. My fists were about to roll into their knuckled positions. Pale and ugly. His eyes were still dark and devious, nothing changing there. His build was about the same. He liked to hit the gym and build them toy muscles that didn't help him too much in a fight.

"Aw, come on now. Don't be like that. I thought we could still be friends. After all you went through on my behalf I feel like I should at least pay you a visit." The ugly spirit of his taunting tone made me want to unzip my backpack real quick and slit his throat with my hunting knife.

"We ain't friends and I regret every single day I did in that hell hole for you. Your a big bag of bullshit to me, Derek. Get away from my fishing spot right now before I get Clive to come out here with his long range and shoot you right between the eyes." I realized how mad I really was as I put my index finger up to my temple. "Then on top of that, how about I get my knife to your throat and let it be that? You know how good I am with a knife." All of the pent up bitterness flew right out of my mouth to him and I hoped it would have some impact, but he just laughed. Rogue started to bark now and being a dog true to his master he lunged forward with his canines displayed and his snout curled up as he latched his teeth onto Derek's leg and yanked at his pants. Rogue started shaking Derek's leg from side to side. Derek shook off his leg as if he was shaking off a leech.

"You-what-get your dog off me! Get him off me right now!" Derek shouted and I cackled and coughed at my boy.

"Good boy, Rogue. Goodboy. You got a nice set of teeth there. Sic him!" I let Rogue shake him out a little more as Derek backed away from me with Rogue not letting up and

his eyes wide. I figured if I called him in a few minutes when I was done having my fun he would come back to me. I was right. I whistled with my two fingers between my teeth and called Rogue to me.

"Ah boy! Let him loose. Come on, Rogue!"

Rogue ran to me with his floppy ears and barked sitting beside me as I tried to hold back my tears from laughing. I didn't look Derek's way. I kept my eye on the catch that had latched onto my line. "Now get on, Derek. I ain't got nothing to say to you. If you try me I'll sic him on you again."

His panting was loud in the silence between the boulders of the mountain. "You- you, you don't know what you're doing. You're a stupid man." Not much of a comeback. He didn't look to have any weapons so I let him go back from whence he came.

I stroked Rogue's fur. "You are a great dog you know that? Way to go. I like your style, boy." Rogue yapped a few times in response as he went back to his happy tail wagging. I tilted my head to the breeze and inhaled all that was good about freedom. "I like your style, yep, I sure do. You should have broken the skin just a little bit. Now that would have been mighty good." Rogue barked again.

BACK AT THE club that night, with the victory dance cup I should have been rolling in, I sauntered in grinning. "Hey now, Mustang. Any news?" I was in a good mood on account of my dog putting his teeth to good use on Derek.

Mustang looked to be in a good mood, too. Nightfall was casting its long dark shadow on Santa Fe and I was enjoying the contrast from the heat of the sun out near the river.

"We got a few things going on. We've decided to go with your little idea and do a charity ride for underprivileged kids in the New Mexico region. I feel like it's a good fit even though some of the old ladies didn't know why we didn't ask them. I told them they could all join in, but they got their panties in a bunch." Mustang winked because we both knew what it was really about.

"A little bit of fire and competition never hurt. I don't want them getting too upset, especially Bell. She's got a little too much fire, she might scare them off. They are the Guardian women after all." Mustang's rugged jaw expanded as his lips turned into a smile.

"Bell would fly kick one of them in the stomach and that would be the end of the charity ride. We don't need that type of problem, that's for sure. We want a nice community ride that helps people, not puts them in the hospital. She needs to calm down. Those girls are young and she knows they aren't a threat for real." We both broke out into laughter as Breaker came out in his jacket ready for the night's patrons who were already looking to come in and wet their whiskers with a drink.

"What are y'all laughing about?" he asked.

"Nothing, don't worry. I do wanna talk to you about the expansion, both of you actually. The mechanics side of things and the shop... aren't necessarily working as well



here. I'm seriously thinking we might just turn the whole place into a bar and add the bands."

Breaker raised his eyebrows with a smile. "Yeah? Like a full scale bar and stuff? That would be wicked. That's a whole other ball game. Are we ready to turn this place into a club like that?" Breaker asked as he bit his lip. I had the same reservations as him, but with Mustang at the helm I definitely figured that could work.

Mustang winced. "Yes and no. We need a secretary or someone to do the books who's heavy in the nightclub game. We need someone like that. If we can get that going we can do it."

"Heavy in the nightclub game. Heavy in the nightclub game. All the people I know... they are sketchy as hell. I don't know if I wanna recommend them to the club."

"Hmm. Might wanna let me know anyway. Sometimes - like you- there's diamonds in the rough." Mustang winked as I contemplated my connections.

"I'm definitely the rough end of the stick, but I got some worth I'm hoping.

"That you do. Plenty of it, Rip. By the way, you got a thing for the redhead?" Breaker asked as I walked through.

"I might but she's a little cagey. I gotta show her I'm really a nice guy." I grinned at Breaker and he snickered at the nice guy part. From the outside looking in that was a debatable aspect.

"With a bad edge," he added. He tapped me on the back as I moved to my spot near the bar and to give Mickey a good ribbing. That little bit of bad didn't hurt anybody I figured. Might be useful to her someday, too.



## PETA

I rejected him, but I didn't mean it completely. I wanted to spend time with him and I just wanted to be sure. The sad thing I'd learned about dating was you could never be sure. I'd weaned myself off the Tinder app and although it was exciting to get the instant gratification from the application with all the male attention, I realized it was better for me to value myself and let life lead me to the right guy for me. The animal shelter was a little crazy. We received a litter of kittens that were the cutest balls of gray and white fluff that I'd ever seen. Their little yelps were so incredible my heart melted and like always every staff member magnetized to the cuteness that was animals.

"Oh my god, who would leave these? Why? Didn't the mother want to come back for her kittens?" Daley, one of the volunteer staff said as we looked at the cardboard box full of fur that was dropped off that morning.

The lady who dropped them off looked distressed and her hair was piled into a messy bun on top of her head. "No, it wasn't like that. There was a mother for the kittens. She got run over trying to chase one of the kittens onto the road to pick them up." The lady touched her head and started crying as I tried to comfort her.

"Oh wow, are you okay? Is she okay, the mama cat?" The lady looked like she was going to hyperventilate and topple over any minute.

She touched her chest as a few of us huddled around her and the vet came out to take over the kittens. "No, half her head was splattered. Someone left the cat there to die," she wept profusely and I could feel her pain. I knew what it was like to witness that. I'd seen it and it was unnerving to see roadkill on the road like that. "She was so beautiful, too. This beautiful shade of gray. I saw some of the kittens mewling off the side of the road and the others ran to their mother and were licking at her. I couldn't-" she heaved with a large gulp of air as I rubbed her back. "I couldn't leave her there. I couldn't. I brought them here. Please help them. I'm sorry, I'm a bit of a wreck. I'm sure you see this stuff all the time. I don't though. I can't handle it."

She barely was able to take a breath before she kept going. "I was on my way to work. I put them in the box. It's all I had in my trunk. I hope that was enough." The tissues came from one of the staff as we listened to the awful story and it wasn't the first one that I'd heard. There were more of them.

"You did the right thing. The vet is going to find all those kittens a good home, trust

me. They won't last long here," I reassured the clearly rattled woman.

"I hope so, I really do. Please let me know. Will you do that for me?"

"Of course we will. You brought the kittens to the right place." I touched her hand as she got up and moved over to the front counter and I had her fill in some documents as the founder of the kittens. Once she left I blew out a large sigh.

"Jeepers, that was a fun start to the morning," I said out loud to myself. I grabbed a bottle of water and started to decide what paperwork I needed to tackle when the phone rang.

"Hello. I am looking for a lady with lots of beautiful red hair who might know a dog named Rogue. Know where I can find her?" Rip's pleasant voice on the other end of the line made me smile.

"Hey Rip. How are you?" I asked in a drawn out tone giggling at his little game.

"I'm doing pretty good. Real good in fact. Rogue has been missing you and we would like to know if you care to join us at the dog walking park for a walk this fine Saturday. Nothing too hectic. Just a walk."

He was persistent at least, and a walk in the park wasn't going to be a problem for me. It would give me a chance to reconnect with Rogue and feel out Rip a little more and see what he was looking for from me.

"If it's just a walk then fine, I'll meet you at the same time?" I looked up toward the double doors as a boy came in with a large box and what looked to be a scaly reptile in it.

"Yup. I'll meet you then." He looked like he was struggling a little bit so I wanted to help him. "I don't want to rush you off the phone, but it looks like we have a lizard coming through the door. I have to go," I said quickly as a kid came in with another large box and I raised my eyebrows. It was a funny old morning and I was loving it.

"That sounds fun. I will leave you to your lizard rescue."

"Thank you," I chuckled quietly into the phone as I ended the call and directed my focus to the boy. "What do we have here?"

"I got a couple of lizards in here and I think a dog took a bite out of it. It's wounded pretty bad. Do you think you can help it?"

"Sure we can. Let's take a look at it. What's wrong with the other one?" I inquired as I took the box off his hands.

"Nothing, but they were together and I thought they might be friends so I didn't want to separate them."

We sure did have the best people come in and they were animal lovers through and through.

A SHORT FEW days later and I was letting the sunbeams hit me while I swung my crossed leg over the other in the dog park. A sharp, distinctive woof lit up my face. I knew that sound regardless of how many dogs and cats I'd seen. "Rogue! There you are. I

missed you!" Rogue's tail was wagging like a rotor blade on a helicopter. His tawny paws rested on my knees as I rubbed his floppy perfect ears.

"Ah! Rogue, what did I tell you about climbing on people with your dirty paws? She doesn't want your footprints, get down off her." Rip disciplined Rogue as he groaned in his throat, but he started to bark again. I did notice that he actually listened to Rip's command.

"I'm impressed, you're training him well. That was pretty good."

"Yep. He listens most of the time and it's a good thing he's not pissing in the house anymore. I was getting tired of putting all that newspaper down every night."

"That is good. Seems like Rogue is learning pretty quick. He has the right owner," I praised as I got up and dusted off Rogue's muddy paw prints. I was used to it, but they were my good jeans.

Rip looked down at my jeans. "I'm sorry about that. How have you been? You ride here?" He asked with keen interest.

"I did. I'm looking forward to the ride with the Guardians. I think it's going to be a lot of fun. I'm going to polish up my bike and make sure I'm ready to rumble." I did a little dance and I probably looked a little foolish to him, but he would have to deal with some of my quirks sooner rather than later.

"It will be." We started our walk and like last time a few other owners had their pets off the leash and the dogs were enjoying the madness of one another and playing together.

"Can I ask you a question, Peta?" Rip asked and my heart skipped a beat with what he was about to ask me.

"Is there a reason you don't want to date me? Am I too old for you or something like that? Just curious."

"It's not that I don't want to date you. I wanted to spend time with you, like a friendship. I don't know, I guess I haven't been meeting nice guys and you're from this badass biker club and stuff so I guess I thought, I don't know..."

Rip nodded. "That's a fair call. I'm no saint. I'll give you that much and I smoke cigarettes, but I'm cutting back. Try not to judge me too harshly for it. I've made some mistakes in the past, but I can tell you one thing. I mean you no harm. That's for sure. I like talking to you and I find you attractive. A date won't hurt anything," he said gently.

There was a softer touch to him, and he seemed to have this familiarity to him, like I'd known him before for some reason. Hard to put my finger on. Like *déjà vu* or something like that.

"I appreciate your honesty. I do... I guess that's what I wanted to know."

"There you have it. Oh, and I like to fish a lot. That's part of the reason why they call me Rip. I can gut a fish and whip you up a real nice meal. How about that?" The way he said it should have made me disturbed, but it didn't. It made me like him a little more. He was raw, unapologetic and honest. I was a little more at ease with every step we took over the grass.

"You fish? That's pretty cool. The last time I went fishing my line got caught in a tree behind me and I almost broke the reel. I don't think I'm too good at that pursuit," I

confessed. "I might not be the best fishing buddy for you."

Rip started to sputter a little and his upper lip started to twitch as if he was holding back from laughing. "I'm gonna have to teach you how to fix that. Happens to the best of us. Gotta admit, that hasn't happened to me for over twenty years, but still, it's happened."

I became amused that he was amused at my inability to fish. "I get it. Maybe you should teach me. That might be cool. I don't know of too many fishing spots around here." He was continuing to grow on me like a seed that had been planted in the ground and Rogue already had a piece of my heart so I figured him having a piece of it made sense. Rogue seemed like his best dog self with him and I was happy that they'd found one another.

We walked a little further and Rogue came back from playing with the other dogs to walk in line beside us. He really did love Rip and that gave him another set of points with me.

By the time we'd done a few laps around the oval we came back to our vehicles. Rip ran his hand over my bike. "I'm thinking about getting a sidecar for Rogue then he can ride with me. I gotta talk to Shaggy or Rush about it. He's pretty good at the custom design side of things."

We were standing pretty close together and I thought from what he told me earlier about the cigarettes that his breath would smell, but he smelled like minty fresh toothpaste more than anything. Rogue nuzzled his wet nose into my leg and then nuzzled it into Rip's which had me look down in surprise. "The sidecar sounds like a fun idea, just make sure he has a seatbelt. I don't think he can lean around corners," I stirred the pot a little bit. I liked bantering with Rip. "If I didn't know any better I would think that Rogue is trying to match make us."

"Would that be a problem?" Rip said as his golden flecked eyes looked at mine with intensity.

"Ah, no, I guess it wouldn't be so much, we're still getting to know one another," I said as we eased together like two magnets. Rip's mouth was like a wonderland and not what I thought at all. His lips were soft and inviting, his mouth minty fresh just like I thought. The bristly hairs of his mustache didn't even bother me when our lips collided. I kind of liked it brushing against my upper lip. I leaned into the kiss as he put a hand lightly on my hip. His was a tender kiss and it made me feel warm and gooey mostly. The stereotypes that were drifting through my mind were completely different to what I thought he would be as a person. He was wowing me in a good way.

"You got a sweet pair of lips. I like them," Rip growled as he ran his thumb across my mouth and I felt my whole body flush with warmth and desire.

"Thank you. You taste like after dinner mints or something." Rogue barked a little happy bark. It was almost as if he orchestrated the moment between us.

"I got this new toothpaste. I guess it's working well," he said with a slight flush on his face.

He was funny in an awkward way without trying and it sure was appealing to me. He might have been the good stranger that I wanted him to be. "Yeah, it is. By the way, are

you going to be at the charity ride?" I asked him.

"Yep. I'm going to be there. I wouldn't miss it. We got a nice little route planned out, should be real nice and I hope the weather holds out for it. I know all of Santa Fe's pockets and places, so it's going to be a good ride."

"I think it will. I got a good feeling about it."

"Yep, me, too." We went our separate ways after that and I felt good about the direction we were heading in. I still had a weird sensation that I'd seen, or known him from somewhere and I put it down to the fact I might have seen him out somewhere.

THE CHARITY RIDE came up pretty quickly and each one of the Rumlbers were pumped to be a part of it. "Can you believe that we are riding with the Guardians? This is going to be the coolest. There's already about 500 people registered to come to the community barbecue afterwards. It's going to be epic," Michaela said as she zipped up her Rumbler jacket.

"I want to race one of them. I wanna see if they have any kick to them, I really do. Especially that Stunt guy. He seems really dope. I wanna see some of those tricks he can do. I mean, if he can do it we can do it right?" Willow argued as I gave her a look.

"Willow, remember the last time you tried your hand at stunts? You ended up in the ditch with a bruised tailbone and had to sit in one of those doughnut things for the rest of the month. I don't think it's your best plan," Lisa reminded her as we all broke out in laughter at the memory. She complained for the whole month and it was an absolute nightmare for everyone.

"I did okay still. If I could have landed it, that would have been the greatest feat ever," Willow responded with optimism and we all looked back at her with a healthy dose of skepticism.

"You're doing just fine on two wheels, and I don't want to have to lift you up out of the dirt again. That was an ordeal," Robin threw in as the rest of us sniggered.

"Hey, are you trying to say I'm fat?" she simpered.

"No, Willow, just that you're a little reckless is all. Come on, let's go do this ride and raise some money for the good people!" Robin called out.

We had our own little warcry and we clapped our hands and put them in the circle before we left out to go take the ride with the Guardians. I was excited for two reasons: I would get to see Rip, and I would get to experience a ride with twenty other riders. All that grunt and horsepower was about to hit the streets in a big way and it made the fire rise inside my belly.

We rode over to the Guardians' clubhouse single file and there were over twenty bikes parked there and my heart felt as if it wanted to jump out of my chest. The guys were dressed to ride with their patches and some of them in leather pants. The old ladies were there, but this time they didn't seem to be as hostile. I was focused on one of them only. Her name was Bell Marco. I wanted to keep a close eye on her because she seemed

volatile to me. I saw her standing off to the side and our eyes locked. If I wasn't mistaken I saw the little hint of a smile curving at the side of her lip.

I could see that a couple of them were bringing out the barbecue for after the ride festivities that were going to be held.

The guy who had muscles stacked on muscles, the one who happened to be the club president came over to greet us first with Rip following close behind with his bright smile. "Hello ladies. Are we ready to ride today and have some fun? We got a nice cruisy route through the main town center and then over to Edgewood and downtown there. It should be an easy and safe ride provided everybody follows the rules. I want you to meet Hawk who is the Edgewood road captain, he's going to lead us out today."

A more streamlined built guy with a helmet in hand and a sturdy, pocket rocket physique came over to us. I looked him up and down, his face was sharp and angular and he had eyes like a hawk so I could see why he was named that. He looked like a pretty serious type of guy, but as he got closer to us his face broke out into a smile that changed his whole expression.

"Ladies, I see you've all got your gear on. I like those jackets. Nice way to represent the Rumlbers. Shows me that you're ready. Nothing too crazy today, the cops do know we're riding so that's taken care of. We are going to cruise so no racing no matter how bad you wanna do it," Hawk winked and I heard Willow groan in the back. Hawk chuckled at Willow. "I knew their would be one with a competitive spirit. Remember, it's a community ride. Another time." He looked pretty good, he had a nice set of dimples on him. Standing next to Rip who was smiling at me - Rip was my preferred choice.

Once all the bikes rolled out of their clubhouse it was an amazing sound to hear all the bikes in unison. To many that would be a sound that hurt their ear drums, but to me it sounded like pure magic. We followed Hawk out one by one as he dropped his bandana by his side to signal us that we were ready to ride.

I ended up with a wide grin all the way to Edgewood. That didn't help my teeth any with the wind whipping across them, but I felt so uninhibited and part of something bigger, and that was always a good feeling to me. We waved to the people who came out of their homes to look at us in curiosity. Kids and adults were intrigued by the procession of riders blazing through their town. We beeped at them and one of the Guardians even did a couple of stunt wheelies on the back roads where it was safe. The people that were watching cheered at the display. Whoever he was, he was pretty impressive. It was the perfect day and it ended even better with a community barbecue and everyone mixing and mingling together. The animosity that clouded our first meeting was gone and the lady with thighs that looked like they could crush someone came over to me. I went into armor mode and felt as if I had to protect myself.

"It's okay, I'm in a better mood today. I wanted to come over and apologize for the last time I spoke to you. I know I came off a little harsh. I'm the protective type over the club. Now that I've seen you ladies in action I know you don't have evil intentions." She looked like a whole different person when she smiled and I felt a little more at ease and I got a good look at the veins in her biceps. She was rippling fit and I looked like Madam pipsqueak next to her.



Rip came over to join my side and he looked warily at Bell. We hadn't had much time to speak to one another since the start of the ride with everything flowing and all the extra people that were in the parking lot lining up for food. Bell saw the warning look from Rip and let him know with a tight smile that there was no need to worry.

"Thanks for the apology, Bell. I get it. The club must have a lot of rivals."

"We do, but we're slowly weeding them out, aren't we, Rip?" Bell said to him cheerfully.

"We are for sure. Glad you're in a good mood, Bell." Bell flipped her long, dark glossy hair off her shoulders and nodded her head at Rip.

"Sure am. I will leave you two to talk. See you around, Peta. I love your hair, by the way. It's awesome." She winked as she sashayed off to the food that was making my stomach growl. The ride was making the juices flow in my belly. The ride had livened up my appetite, but at that moment I was stuck on the compliment from Bell that caused my mouth to hang wide open.

"Did she just compliment my hair?"

Rip closed his eyes and let out a disconcerting sigh. "That's Bell for ya. She can be unpredictable. The good news is that she likes you and that can only be a good thing. I've seen her roundhouse kicks in action and you don't want to be on the wrong end of that."

I pulled my hair back. "Sheesh. Maybe she should be called Flame and not me."

Rip slipped a hand around my waist. "Flame. You are like a hot flame and I gotta tell you, I like the burn." His cheesy line made me run hot on the inside, but it also caused me to laugh.

"How do you feel? That was pretty cool huh? We raised close to four thousand dollars for charity. Pretty impressive for an idea that we only came up with a few weeks ago."

I nodded my head. "Yep. I loved the ride, it was a lot of fun. That was the best."

"You're the best," Rip said kindly as he leaned in and kissed my lips softly. People were around us but nobody seemed to notice us stealing a little kiss for ourselves and that's the way I liked it.

SEVEN

RIP

Seeing Derek at my fishing spot did enough to warrant me getting my guns in order in the house. I made it a point to let the Guardians know. If Derek tried to get to me and I showed up downstream then at least I wanted someone to know about where to pick me up.

As I rode into work I unveiled the secret I'd been carrying to Mustang. "Hey, I gotta talk to you a minute. I think I might have a past problem that's come back to haunt me. I want to tell you because it might affect you guys, too."

Mustang cracked his knuckles and I looked down at his hands wondering if it was a habit or if he cracked them because of what I just said. I stared at the somber look on his face and I figured it was the latter. "What are we in for, Rip?" he asked in a neutral voice.

"You know I served time right?"

"Obviously. Yeah, we know. You got inside beef still?" Mustang asked trying to anticipate the play.

"You could say that, except it's not coming from the inside, but I shouldn't have any at all. I served time for something I didn't do. I mean I was there, and I was regretful and all that, but I shouldn't have been penalized with ten years inside for it. I took the fall for this mug and he's still casing me," I huffed. "Now I figure if he is casing me then he's going to be casing us as a whole soon. He caught me at my fishing spot and I told him if he didn't leave I was going to shoot him. He got going and Rogue helped out, too."

Mustang chuckled. "Rogue might just be our new guard dog."

I snickered. "Yup, he laid into him with his teeth. Now I don't know why he's coming around and thinking that something is going on, but I want him to get on his way and stay the hell out of my life. I got nothing to do with that former life. I tell you that much."

"We know, and I trust you, Rip. We will tell the guys and as long as you're with us we got you covered. If he comes this way we got plenty of firepower for him. He's one person right?"

I got a funny feeling when he made mention of being one person. Derek wasn't a person to be underestimated by any means. "You don't know him. I wouldn't underestimate Derek. He's a different breed and he's old school."

"I'm old school, what are you talking about? Forget it, we got you covered anyway. What can we expect?"

"He won't come alone. He'll have someone with him. Trust me."

"Then we will have all of us waiting for him. He'll have to come and play with all of us."

"He won't like that so much, that's for sure." I got back to fixing a few shelves behind the bar while the thought of Derek circled my mind. If I could take a time travel machine and go back in time to when I first met the sucker I would, and on top of that when I got there I would tell him to go straight down the river with all those other uncaught fish that weren't fit for eating .

Too late for the belly aching now, Derek would be up to his old tricks. I wasn't close to him so I didn't know who he ran with anymore. If it was anyone of those wicked thieves from the past that we ran with then they didn't stand a chance.

Gunner would shoot them quick as dead, Mustang would strangle them and snap their neck or maybe that would be Breaker if he managed to get his hands on them. I would pull my hunting knife out. I shook my head of the violent thoughts I was having and got back down to the work at hand.

It was a long ass day and by the time I got home all I wanted to do was sit down with Rogue with my shoes off and pat my dog and nurse my beer. I did just that, I kicked off my boots, flicked on the TV and was pretty content with where the night was headed other than a goodnight text to Peta to let her know I was thinking of her.

My phone buzzed and my beer found itself jumping out of its hole and onto the floor. "Shit!" I picked up the phone answering quickly. "Rip. This better be good."

"We got a problem." Mustang was on the other end of the line and I figured what I told him about Derek was about to come to fruition.

"What's that, prez?"

"Three of the bikes and one of the cars that we'd been working on were lifted out of the warehouse. Given what you told me earlier today I assume it's your friend Derek?"

Without any shadow of a doubt I knew it was him. "I know it's him." From my belly anger and fire rose. I wasn't about to have my whole life ruined by the guy that ruined my past, so this was the time to act.

"We are going to have to do something. I'm going to talk to Red to resurrect the chop shop team. I'm going to see how Brody feels about leading it. She was the best one of the team from what Red told me. He might be biased but I trust his judgment."

"That's smart. She would be the best person to think like Derek because the guy is sneaky and that's what he does best. Sneak. I do know where his old crew used to run out of, but that was ten years ago. I don't know if they're in the same spot."

"Okay, text me the details and let me run with this. I don't want your hands on it, because my guess is that he knew you would be aggravated and that's trying to get you to react so he can send you back to the slammer. Stay all the way out of it and let us handle it."

"That would be like him. Something like that," I murmured.

"Don't worry, that's not going to happen. You're not going back to the slammer and we got you covered as a club like I said. The chop shop team is going in, baby, and we are going to get those bikes and cars back pronto."

"Were they customer's bikes?"

"Not all. Mickey left his car at the warehouse and rode his bike home so that was his car. Two of the others were customers so we are going to fix it right now. I don't know what they plan on doing, but we gotta get those cars and bikes back real quick."

"What's the camera footage look like? How the hell did he get in there? We got an alarm system and all!"

"The system was down for a minute because Gunner was working on fixing parts of it. Shitty timing for it to happen, but we have to be on guard at all times. We got enemies trying to take us down for real."

"That's insane. Four bikes! Man. I can't sit here and do nothing. I gotta be in this." I jumped up off the couch and Rogue barked at my sudden movement and started wagging his tail.

"Nope. It's covered. Gunner is packing his shit right now, Red is on the phone rounding up the crew. We are already flying in. Send me the location and we can get this one and done now. Trust me." Mustang was so self assured that it left me baffled. Derek and his high stake tricks.

"Okay, let me get off the phone then. Let me know if you need any more details."

"I will." Mustang clicked off the phone and I slammed my hand on the couch again as Rogue barked and his ear flipped forward.

"Hey, not at you. Don't worry. It's just we got an issue from the past and it's my fault." Rogue lifted his snout and started to howl. "It's not that simple, but hey, thanks for the encouragement."

Sleep evaded me that night as I tossed and turned reliving the night where we botched the robbery years ago. The police shining their invasive flash lights in my face and me not wanting to face defeat when they carted me off to the dungeon that they called prison.

By the time I woke up the feeling of being punched in the mouth ten times in succession greeted me along with a blanket of sunshine that I was not ready for. "Ugh. Turn the sun down."

Grappling my phone out of the charger I looked at the calls. All five of them sitting there waiting for me on my phone. I scrolled through all of them as I poured Rogue his morning dry food. He nuzzled into the back of my knee and I rubbed his head. "Hey buddy. There's your crunchies. Let me get some wet food for you, too."

First message. On deck with seven. He's got the bikes and the car. Loading them off. He's laughing. He won't be.

Second message. Gunfire. We got it.

Third message. You'll wake up to this. Motorbikes and car retrieved.

Fourth message. Few treats of our own.

Fifth message. See you when you get here.

There was another message. Peta. Good morning, Rip and Rogue. Hope you have a good day. See you soon. xxx

Now that was a message that didn't raise my blood pressure, at least not in the same way. Rifling a hand through my hair and tapping my hands on my belly, I stared at the

contents of my fridge. There wasn't a damn thing in there that was fit for breakfast so I decided it would be time for me to take myself down to the local cafe for a hot coffee and find something that smelled like bacon and eggs. I gave Rogue a pep talk for the day as I kissed his furry head and left him to roam the backyard and play. I hated leaving him like that because he always knew when I was leaving.

Rogue dipped his head as he saw me pick up my helmet with one of them throat groans he was known for doing when he wanted my attention.

"Come on, don't do that. You know I gotta go to work." Rogue woofed to let me know he didn't care one little bit. In a spontaneous decision that made the most sense since I got him I lassoed him with his leash and put him in the car with me. This time a bark of excitement rattled the windows. "So this is what you wanted all along. I get it, Rogue. I get it. You can come with me anytime. I'm sure the guys won't mind, either. You gotta be good. If you're good I'll set you up a bed there. Can be like your second home. What you think?"

Rogue answered with a grateful bark. Imagine that, the sanest thing I ever spoke to was a dog. Tickled me right down to my toes. I sent a photo to Peta of me and Rogue happy together in the front seat. I stopped off and got my breakfast fix as I promised myself and let the coffee run through my tired veins as I sipped and thought about the news that was in store when I got to the clubhouse.

By the time Rogue and I got to work it felt like I'd shaken off some of the sluggishness of only sleeping for three hours. Me and Rogue had such a tight knit relationship that I didn't feel like I had to put him on a leash. He would know what to do and when. Rogue led himself into the warehouse with a curious Mustang standing at the door. Rogue sniffed at the bottom of his leg as Mustang looked down at him with a smile. That smile was the happiest one I'd ever seen from Mustang. Rogue seemed to think Mustang was a pretty sturdy and stable type of tree. He barked as his tongue wagged and cocked his back leg to pee on Mustang. I heard the piddle as the yellow liquid hit the bottom of Mustang's pants.

"Ahh! Rogue, he might look like a tree, but he's not one." Mustang and a few of the crew burst out laughing at Rogue.

Mustang shook out his pants leg. "Ugh. Wow. That's a hell of a greeting, furball. You're going to fit right in here." I threw Mustang a rag so he could wipe down the corner that Rogue had stained. Mustang bent down and Rogue lapped up the pats from Mustang. I figured he liked the new work arrangement.

"Thought I would bring him in. He's a good dog. I know he tried to pee on ya, but he won't do anybody any harm unless he smelled a rat."

"I'm glad he's here." I spotted two new vehicles out back and looked at Mustang.

"Yep, we lifted two for us. I think one of them is Derek's. We moved in on them so fast, Rip, it was like I was back in the unit." Mustang was cutting back to his unit days and the fire in his pupils told me so. "Gunner didn't even have to do too much. A couple of shots fired and they only had two people guarding their spot. Nice lofty warehouse, too. Ideal. If I was a more ruthless leader I would have invaded their space."

"I know." A foggy memory floated in of being in the space and dropping off the stolen

goods that we collected from rich people, poor people and any others that we could scavenge from. Maybe me taking the sentence was part of my own self penancing for all the evil deeds I committed, but at some point I would have to stop carrying it around like a ball and chain.

"He's going to come for them." The foggy feeling in my eyes remained as I looked at the cars sitting there.

"We're banking on it." Mustang cupped his hand on my shoulder. "Come on, I need some help at the bar with some new shelves I wanna put in before tonight."

"No problem."

I RANG Peta after hours knowing that she would be finished at the animal shelter. "Hey you. Are you done for the day or are you shoveling hay for the horses?"

"No stables here, but I guess if their were I would be shoveling the hay out. How about you and Rogue? So funny that I name you both together, it's like R and R. That has a ring to it."

An eyebrow raised at her observation. "I guess you could say that. We are a package deal. Rest and relaxation is our middle name. Right now I want to be doing just that but I gotta mind the bar patrons tonight. Are you free tomorrow evening by any chance?" My heart got to pounding when Peta spoke on the phone. I wanted to be around her, her youthful spirit and spitfire made me feel like a whole man again.

"I'm going to be at the Rumblers tomorrow night. If you and Rogue wanna come by that could work. We have a little meeting going on. It should be finished by six- thirty. Can you do that?"

"Hmm, the Rumblers. You got a pretty nice crew. I can swing on through there. We could get a late night drink and some food at the diner if you want to. That work?"

"Great. I like it."

"See you tomorrow night."

We hung up and the next night I got to go see Peta, and she was there with the girls from the charity ride. All of them were giving me their best high watt smiles as I walked in with Rogue. Rogue was a shameless flirt and went right up to the girls one by one and started licking them.

"That's Rogue, can't keep him away from the ladies."

One of the girls threw me a sharp look. "Like the owner right?"

"Ah, now wait a minute. I only got eyes for the one lady." I angled my head to Peta who was turning as bright red as her hair from the attention. Her curls were guarding her emotions so I couldn't tell if she felt the same way about me. I knew she was dating, but with all the disturbances we hadn't had a lot of time to discuss or talk about us some more.

"That's so sweet of you. I like that you said that. You've got a lot of women here and if you said the wrong thing we would have had to throw you out," one of them

emphasized and I choked on my own saliva at her candidness.

"Tell it like it is. I appreciate you not kicking me out. I'm only bringing good dog vibes and myself."

"We can see that. Rogue is the best. You picked the right dog for you," one of the ladies identified as she patted Rogue and he barked at the sound of his name. He sat still next to the woman to receive more pats and love. My furball couldn't get enough and I didn't blame him. If I was a dog I would be getting all the pats from women that I could get.

"Ohh, this is out of this world. Can you stay? I just want him to stay. He's the best. You get to work with animals like this all day. I can't believe it," one of the Rumlbers cooed. I'm pretty sure it was the president Michaela, but since I wasn't good with names I left it.

The classic beauty of Peta made it hard to believe that she was even interested in me. To even have a foot in the door with her was a big deal for me. I would take it, she was worth it. Peta's ocean blue eyes signified it was time to go as she said goodbye to the rest of the Rumbler crew.

As we left out and I took my reluctant trooper away from the women I found my courage. "Did I embarrass you back there by saying you were the only one I was seeing?"

"No. I was thinking of how quickly you said it... I have been out on a couple of dates from the time I met you, but I'm not now. I'm only dating you, as well." Her revelation to me right there made me want to start cartwheeling down the asphalt but my walk stayed the same and I let my little smile stay right inside of me.

"We have a clean slate then, if you were dating somebody else I wouldn't care. It's one of them let the best man win situations. Sometimes it's good for men to be put to the test." I winked at her and that was the truth, but golly it felt good to know that I was a little closer to winning her heart.

Peta's lovely eyes shuttered at me in the moonlight. "Seems you beat them out of their spots." Peta's curls landed gently on my chin as she lightly kissed my lips. The night was already better than any other in the week.



EIGHT

## PETA

Rip was an unusual man to me, but oddly we fit together solidly. We had things in common with our bikes, but even more than that we both loved Rogue. Every jagged piece of his face whispered a story that was itching to be told. I wanted to find out about those stories, what made him tick. He seemed a little discontent from the way he was moving around in the diner seat and it put me on edge. "Do you have something to say? You seem a little off today."

My spoon was dipping in and out of the soup I ordered as I watched Rip pull his fingers through his hair for the tenth time. "Are you open to hear about it?"

"Of course. How else are we going to get to know one another? I want to hear."

"I've done prison time." The rattle of my spoon splashing in my soup and the back splash from it made me jump. I took the napkin up and wiped down the front of my shirt.

"You have? How long were you in for and what for?" Now my fascination was set in. I was dating an ex-criminal. I wanted to tell myself ex-criminal because I assumed that he was no longer involved with criminal activity. I questioned what he was involved in with the Guardians however. Careful about what you want to know.

"Ten long, rotten years and it wasn't my fault." Rip's face twisted into a bitter way and I could see that he was still upset about it.

"Then why did you do it?" A simple question, but I doubted the answer would be simple.

"Because I'd done some bad stuff and he promised to look out for me with good lawyers, you know, but he didn't. I don't want to scare you." Rip closed his fingers over mine to try and soften the situation between us. "I don't try to do anything criminal now, but I am a part of the Guardians and I'm the road captain so it comes with the territory that I gotta do what I have to do from time to time. I didn't want to tell to you, but I don't want to hide my past from you."

"I figured you would have to," I told him. "I know you're no knight in shining armor, but that's why I like you."

"Glad to disappoint you then." His sharp comeback sprung a sudden laugh from my lips.

"Tell me more about it. I wanna know. Most people know about the task force helping out with the meth houses in Edgewood, but is there anything else? The bar you guys

have seems to be doing well. I want to come down with my friends one night and have a drink.”

“You should. Would love to see you there. First one on the house. The bar is going real good, that’s why we’re expanding it. We’re looking into bands coming in. There’s a young lady named Tabitha and she is the partner to Mickey who you saw behind the bar and she’s going to be a trial run for us. She’s going to bring her band through. She draws a crowd so we are going to see how we go with that and work from there.” Somehow we deviated from the original conversation and I didn’t even realize the slip in conversation.

“That’s pretty cool! Let me know when and I will bring the Rumblers along. Are you going to charge a cover for that?”

“I’m sure because the band wants to be paid, so we’ll have to charge a cover.”

“Hmm, anything else?” Rip was still on edge, and I felt like there was more he had to tell me, and finally I was coming back around to learning about his bad boy ways and what he was a part of.

He whooshed out a sigh as his lion-like eyes looked down at his hands on the table.

“We had a situation the other night where some cars and bikes from the clubhouse in Santa Fe were lifted by an old nemesis of mine. We had to go get them with our team and we may have picked up a few of theirs, as well.” Rip assessed me carefully. I guessed he was worried that I would react badly. After the initial jolt from what he told me I surprised myself by being okay with it all.

“Wow. So it’s an eye for an eye type of situation?”

“In a way, but it’s not the norm. We actually do a lot to help the community and in a way the chop shop is to help them, too.”

“Sorry, did you say chop shop?” I’d just resumed eating and feeling back on kilter. When he said chop shop that made me put down my spoon once again. I was doing a mini weight lifting session with it and I had no idea what else Rip was going to pull out of the bag.

Rip automatically covered his fingers with mine and rubbed the tips of my fingers. His warmth sent a tingle through them that ran down my spine. My attraction to Rip was getting stronger and stronger the more time I spent with him. There was this feeling like I knew him already, and that feeling was still in my mind and it wasn’t something I could remove from my head. To me I wasn’t a hopeless romantic or anything thinking that he was my soulmate. But maybe, just maybe there was something to it.

“I did,” he said with a grave disposition as he slicked his hair behind his ear. “You heard right.” Rip took a bite of his food and looked at me for a long minute. “Problem for you?”

“Actually no, but can I ask you how it works?” I leaned forward with one arm folded over the other.

“Can I trust you, Tinkerbell?” Rip asked with a curved upward lip.

“You can. It’s not going anywhere. Besides, me and the Rumblers are not running a chop shop. We are normal every day people.”

Rip sat back and tugged down his faded tee. “You would be surprised how many people pose as everyday people and they are something else entirely.”

I clicked my tongue and flicked a crumb onto his plate. "You have been watching too many crazy shows on TV or something. That's not me. I look after animals, remember? Hello, the girl from the shelter. Besides, how are you saying that when you're the one who has been involved in criminal activity?" I didn't mean for it come off so sarcastic, but I guess it did.

"So you do care about it," he stated.

"No, I don't. Let's stop. Can you tell me?" I tucked my unruly hair back behind me.

"I can. I do trust you. We have a team that lifts cars and they break them down and sell the parts for cheaper to the end consumer. That's mostly in Edgewood, we don't so much run it here in Santa Fe."

"Wow. The cops?" I asked, this was an underworld that I knew nothing about.

"We're good with the cops over there and we've come across one too many crooked ones. I wouldn't feel so excited by them. Considering that we helped them tackle a knee deep meth issue in their own town, there should be no reason for them to feel any kind of way about our chop shop."

"What about the people's cars who you're lifting? I don't know, I'm playing devil's advocate here, but I'm pretty sure they aren't so happy about it, either."

"Ah, hey, all part of the game. We steal from certain people, put it that way. I think that's enough from that end. Just know that we're not so bad." Rip's seductive eyes and smile helped in the belief process.

"I will have to give you the benefit of the doubt on that one."

"Thanks." We finished up eating and we were both so at ease with one another that I asked Rip if he wanted to come back to my house.

"Sure, I got a low key day. I will come hang with you."

"Rogue okay?" We both got up from the diner table and Rip looked at me.

"Rogue is fine, he's outside probably rolling around on his back making himself dirty after I just cleaned him up."

"That's Rogue for you, he likes to roll." That image brought a smile to my face. Rogue keeping Rip on his toes was a good thing. I had a knack for figuring out which dogs belonged with which owners and I could tell that Rip and Rogue were just right for one another. During their doggy meet and greet it was made clear.

"Sure does." Rip paid for our food and we walked out into the sunshine.

"I guess I'm following you to your place?" Rip squinted from the sun, shining a little light onto his dark beard.

"My place isn't too far. Yup, follow me."

My roommate most of the time stayed pretty much to themselves. To me it was a win-win, it wasn't like the shelter was paying much and it allowed me to split costs without going broke. My roommate Josie was pretty quiet and had her own set of friends. She studied and worked at the local grocery store part time. She often came in through the back entrance. She had a boyfriend of her own and she was most likely at his house where she'd been the last several weeks.

The roommate arrangement wasn't a circumstance I thought about too often, but now that I'd spontaneously invited Rip back to mine, it was bringing up the thought that she

might be there and it might make things annoyingly awkward.

Both of us were on our bikes and it was going to be fun to lead Rip to mine. I felt so free with him. I gave him the thumbs up as we both powered up our machines of glory and headed back to my abode. Once I got there and opened the key to the door with Rip tickling me from behind, my worst fears blew up in front of my face. There was noise from the back bedroom. My heart sank.

"Josie!" I called out hoping that I was hallucinating to the sound I just heard. Percy meowed and I petted the top of his head as he slinked along Rip's leg.

"You have a cat?" Rip bent down and petted the top of the cat's head and I could tell that Percy had made an impression on him. I nodded at him with a smile.

"Yessss! I'm back. I'm in my room," Josie replied. I was standing in front of Rip and he'd risen from patting Percy and was holding my hips from behind and kissing me on the shoulder causing a ripple effect of horniness to flood my body. This was the worst timing in the world for her to be home.

"I didn't know you had a roommate, you never told me that," Rip said with an inverted frown.

"Sorry. I should have told you. Does it bother you?"

"Nope. Not a bit. We're just going to chill right?" Rip's mouth sat dangerously close to my earlobe and there was nothing about his actions that spelled of 'just chilling'. He didn't want that and neither did I.

"Sure. We can chill in my room, I have a TV and everything in there."

"Okay, let's chill in your room."

"I should probably introduce you to my roommate. She's real cool."

"Okay, whatever you wanna do." Rip slunk out of his jacket as I nudged my bedroom door open and he flung it onto my queen size bed. He followed me as I led him down the short corridor to Josie's room door and knocked on it.

"Hey Josie. I wanted to introduce you to Rip." Josie was at her computer and she had one earbud in her ear. Josie's eyes sailed to Rip and dressed him down.

"Rip. Like Jack the Ripper?" Josie's deadpan face and the dislodging of the other earbud from her ear caused Rip to laugh hard as I watched his face in horror.

"Not that I last checked. All my victims still have their limbs intact so far." His wiggling eyebrows played into Josie's little joke.

"That's alright then. Have fun." Josie smiled at me and pointed back to her screen to let us know she was preoccupied with what she was into.

Rip chuckled as we re-entered my bedroom. "She's a funny girl. I like her."

"Me, too, that's why she's my roommate, plus she's hardly ever here." Rip immediately dove onto my bed with his back turned as his hair flew out of the sides and put his hands behind his head.

I clicked on the TV and slid in beside him. I sat upright and he rubbed his hand over my leg.

"Get down here where I can see you. Feel you a little bit. I don't care so much about the TV. I want to get snuggly with you." His raspy request turned me on as I slid down next to him and curved my body in a spoon toward him. Being so close to his face and

being in this most intimate quarter with him made me want to fold myself into him. He touched the side of my face as my jeaned leg rubbed up against his. His thin lips curved into a smile. "That's better, you're here," he whispered as I sucked in a raspy breath before his lips graced mine with the most perfect kiss. My fingers reached around his body and the kiss deepened.

His lips sent me to a dream space as he worked his hands through my maze of red hair massaging my scalp. He ran his hand down the side of my body and pressed his wood into the side of my leg. I could hear every syllable of lust in his kiss. I could hear what he was trying to say to me through it. Our legs slotted into one another like a scissor and we kissed one another breathless for the next ten minutes, only then did we stop to draw breath.

"I can't keep kissing you like this. My roommate is next door and I'm not a quiet person. So I think this isn't the best time," I explained unblinking and looking into his flecked eyes.

Rip's chest expanded as I slid my hand up under his tee to run my fingers over his flat stomach. I wanted to feel his flesh under my hands. To experience the magic of it. "Then you gotta stop touching me like that, otherwise I'm gonna do some things. You're gonna get me riled up and that will put you in a world full of pleasure and loud moaning." His teasing taunt made me groan out loud as my core pulsed with need for release.

He chuckled. "So it's not just me then?"

I kissed him quickly as I rolled away from him. "No, it's not just you. It's me, too."

"I can feel that. I was being... ah, playful. I'll let up. Maybe I should go because I don't think I can just sit here with you and watch TV after that." His steady gaze affected me in more ways than I wanted to admit.

"Good idea, even though I want you to stay," I said softly.

"I ain't going nowhere. Call you tomorrow. We can pick this up anytime you want." Now I could see how sexy he was. Now I got what I couldn't put my finger on at the beginning. I got up with him and kissed him one more time. It was as if we couldn't keep our hands off one another. He walked out first with my hand firmly clasped behind him and led me to the door.

"Bye Rip. I had a great time today. Thanks for having enough trust in me to tell me more about your life."

"That's what relationships are about right? Trust." He curled my hair around his finger and sucked the end of one of the strands. Widening my eyes he took it out of his mouth with a grin.

"Bye Tinkerbell." He walked with a spring in his wiry step to his bike.

Being with Rip gave me a little more hope. Things at the animal shelter started to run smoothly and less animals were brought in. This gave me time to organize the monthly tasks like cleaning down the cages and fixing the broken ones so we could take on more animals.

We didn't get together in the next week because we were both tied up with things at work, but Rip and I made plans to get together the following week. That's when things started to take a turn for the worst.

Nightmares about my childhood started to flare up like angry bedtime monsters that I used to be scared of. I woke up in sweaty pajamas. My pajamas were soaked through which gave me the same feeling as if I wet the bed or something. I pulled my soaking pajama top away from my skin and showered down. My roommate snored lightly in her room. I envied her because she was sleeping peacefully without a care in the world. It was strange having her around considering how often she was gone.

The flashes that I started to see showed me the blood curdling screams in the night coming from my mother from the night we were robbed. It showed the memory of being curled up into a ball in the corner of my darkened room. It showed me like a mirror and how I didn't sleep for months on end after it.

It showed me how jumpy I was when somebody touched me. I didn't want to go back there. One night the nightmares got so bad that I rang Rip hoping he would be up. I didn't want to ring my parents because I didn't want them to rehash the moment. It happened so long ago and I couldn't get why all of it was coming up for me now, either.

"Hey, you don't wanna sleep?" Rip replied into the phone. His voice was so soothing and easy going that any anxiety that was on the inside of me died down quickly.

"I can't sleep. I keep having these nightmares." This would be the most vulnerable I'd ever been with a man if I were to tell him.

"Hey, I'm listening. I've had my fair share of nightmares, too, don't worry. You can tell me about it."

Tears were stinging in my eyes and I choked them back. "I have these nightmares from something bad that happened in my childhood." My hope was I wouldn't have to go into detail about it. I wanted to keep the details to myself.

"Man, life will sure try to beat you down won't it?" Every part of my cells that were racing slowed all the way down.

"Sure will." After having a glass of water and Rip making some shady jokes I felt better.

"You feel better or do I need to come through and scoop you up on my bike? I don't mind," Rip offered.

"I have to get up in three hours and I haven't had much sleep. Thank you. I just needed someone to talk to."

"Never feel ashamed about that. I'm here to lean on. If you wanna talk call me. I can't wait to see you next week. I miss ya already."

Rip taught me that men can say nice things. My faith that had been blown out to the wind over the many false starts was being restored. The age gap didn't seem to matter between us. It felt like we were equals and on the same level. He didn't make me feel intimidated at all, but it was still a mystery to me why I felt like I'd seen him before. "I miss you, too, Rip. I was speaking to Michaela yesterday and she told me that we are probably going to be doing some more charity rides with the Guardians. You might not be able to get rid of me."

"I wouldn't want to. I'm happy it's worked out. That wouldn't bother me one little bit."

"Good night, Rip. See you later."

"Night, night. I hope you get the sleep you need. It's a bitch if you don't. I know."

“Ugh. I’m going to try.”

I hung up feeling like I could sleep and I was right but as soon as I heard my radio alarm clock drumming through my skull I wanted to hit the snooze button again.



NINE

RIP

I didn't know if we weren't seeing one another because of the weird dreams she'd been having but we'd been disconnected physically for the last two weeks. We were supposed to see another but she got called away for something at her work. I was working the bar and my mind had to stay on the job because it was the first night that a band had been introduced.

"What's this group called?" Mustang and I were communing off the side keeping an eye on the excitable crowd in front of us.

"They're called The Ringers. Don't ask me why. They're a little more low key than Tabitha's band so I want to be able to see if we can handle them first before we bring the big guns in."

"You are a smart man." I nodded taking in the increased numbers in the space. We were at door capacity already and if we had Tabitha's band we would be stretched thin as it were. My arms were crossed and I was thinking heavily about Peta and wanting to make a way for us to be together.

"I try. I gotta get going on this secretary thing though, right now I'm having a hard time finding the right candidates for the job. It's an ordeal."

"The right person for the job will turn up when you least expect it. I'm telling you."

"Probably right about that. I hope they turn up before we take on this new band arrangement. I gotta keep an eye on the Devils and see what they are doing. You know, enemies close and all."

"Yeah, yeah. I know it. Sometimes I think that saying is defunct. You don't want them close to you, you want them as far away as possible if you ask me."

Mustang flashed me a smile. "Not the Devils. I want them right where we can see 'em."

I stood back near my perch during the uneventful night. Working at a bar made me not want to go to one. Most nights I could talk to the patrons and get to know them. It was like being at the bar anyway. The buzz against my thigh led me to reach down for my phone. Peta was on the other end of it with a picture of a dog and her face. Working with animals was her thing and it was clear as day that she was a nurturing type of girl. Grinning I put the phone back in my pocket as Breaker and another man tussling in the doorway caught my eye.

"Where is he! Where is the little twerp? I know he had something to do with it!" I knew it would be coming. I warned the Guardians that Derek wasn't about to let his cars get taken like that and back down. He must have been white hot under that sweaty collar of his to step right into our den and try to get in. A few of the patrons watched on with interest, but a lot of them were ex-bikers, some were even involved in some shadier things that we let slide, because all they wanted was a place of peace to drink and be merry in. The other half of the crowd were middle aged and younger wanting to listen to music and pick up the opposite sex and have a good time. All of them were welcome as long as they kept it civil and didn't cause an upheaval. Due to our rocky start they didn't worry so much, they knew we would handle it.

"Get out of here! You thought you were going to come and steal Guardian vehicles and we wouldn't retaliate? Take the L and get on your fucking bike before I break this arm at the elbow, how 'bout it?" Breaker was exercising his main claim to fame and that was breaking limbs. I hadn't had the pleasure of watching that happen, but I was watching patiently, well hidden in the shadows for it to go down.

"You're a pack of dirty dogs! Where is Rip?" The scene was escalating and he wasn't letting up. Breaker had him in a choker hold and from the angle I was standing at he was about to get his neck crushed. It was like watching an oncoming train wreck and knowing that all the passengers would have to jump out of the windows if they were to survive. Except this time it was only the one passenger and he was being walked forward by Breaker with ease. I stepped forward and I saw Mickey come from around the bar and put his hand over my chest.

"Nope. Stay right here. You don't want a connection to it. Let him go. He's got no crew if that's what you think. I saw from the bar. You gotta stay back."

I glared at Mickey. "Mickey, get your hand offa me. It's my fight. Derek is here because of me."

"Nope. Too bad. You've mentored me and helped me get it together and I need you around so you're not going back to jail. When something happens to one of us, it happens to all of us. Remember what you told me?" Mickey glared right back at me. He'd really changed, really, really changed. He wasn't a young, helpless, vulnerable drug addict anymore. He was managing the bar like a cake walk. He knew that bar inside and out. This was the new, shiny and polished version of Mickey and it was incredible to see. I didn't even know who I was talking to sometimes.

I sunk my prideful chest back down. "Damn it Mickey, you're right. I'm good. You can take your hand off my chest now, patrons might think you're trying to feel me up."

Mickey gave me a grin. "Hey, anything to stop you from going out there for another jail death wish. Take a few deep breaths and not on them cigarettes, either." Mickey rolled his eyes at me.

"Listen to you! I got a pack in my back pocket, but I haven't been smoking none since Peta. I don't want her kissing a dirty ashtray, that ain't right."

"Women will make you change your ways, won't they?" More grinning from Mickey.

"They sure will, and I'm loving every minute of it." Mickey dropped his arm and patted me a couple of times. I sighed out loud. "Derek. He's worse than the Devils," I grumbled.

Mickey shook his now longish hair. "That's debatable. Speaking of lady friends, how is yours doing? Her and the Rumlbers caused some talk with the old ladies, they were a little rattled by them."

"The youthful ones, it made them feel inferior I think. They don't need to get their feathers ruffled up. Every one of them goes home with a Guardian at night, don't know what the issue is."

The floor of the bar remained the same, people shaking their ass on the dancefloor, old guys sitting at the bar drinking with ease. Women and men talking and flirting, everything was peaceful in the clubhouse. We'd trained our patrons subtly to turn a blind eye to events.

"Still haven't told me how your lady friend is..." Mickey flapped his bar towel over his shoulder as Breaker swept over to us.

"We are getting there. Things are taking their sweet time between us, but I guess that's how it is. Derek isn't helping none."

Mickey nodded as Breaker looked me dead in the eye. "He's lucky I didn't break his neck. He was alone which is like a suicide mission if you ask me. He's obsessed and someone needs to sit the man down and let him know that coming in here guns blazing is not the ticket."

The veins were highlighted on Breaker's shiny head. "You got that right. He is nutso though. He'll be back. He won't leave it like that. Derek likes to double back." Another long held memory surfaced where Derek hit the same property five times for a robbery and evaded the police. It was out of sheer luck that he didn't get arrested.

"I will be waiting to finish him off. I haven't broken any fingers or arms lately. I might need the practice," Breaker said as Mickey flapped his tea towel at Breaker.

"Nice work, enforcer. You might have earned a beer. I got one waiting for you at the bar if you want it."

"Yup, I will be right over there when we close." Breaker smiled and it was clear he liked to fight. It was in him. Some men were built like that. It was as easy to them as eating breakfast and they didn't know any other way to be. Breaker was one of those guys. He was like a few of the men that I met in prison. For me I was on the right side of them there. I knew how and who to make allies with on the inside.

Mustang and Gunner flowed my way next. "Cleaned him up real nice. He's got a nice fat lip on him." Gunner advised rolling a hand through his short cropped hair. I didn't know exactly how I felt that the guys were going to bat on my behalf.

"I don't need you fighting my battles. I-"

Mustang shut me down. "You do. Quit being stubborn. You go near him or are associated with him, it's back to jail for you. There's no evidence here, his cars have already been broken down and are on the chop shop floor in Edgewood. He can't report anything."

"Well, damn. That was quick. How did you move them that fast?" I knew in theory about the chop shop at Edgewood, but I never saw them in action.

"Brody is the business, she runs things. It's handled. You're not supposed to know. In and out, break them down and keep going. That's how it works."

My common sense was back intact now. "If you say it's done, then I believe ya. She is quicker than a gun in the west."

"That's why we hired her," Mustang replied.

As the bar patrons ambled and some stumbled out of the bar Mickey rounded up drinks for us all.

"Protect thine own! Protect thine own!" We chanted at the easy victory, but I knew what they knew, too. Derek would be right back with reinforcements.

ROGUE HAD BEEN a little sulky for the last week or so and doggy speaking to him wasn't working.

"You are too young to be an old grizzler like me. Gotta talk to me, you wanna go fishing again or something?" Rogue tilted his head at my seemingly lackluster answer as he groaned and flopped down on the floor with his legs spread out behind him. "Oh no. Don't do that to me. You depressed? How come? Your treats are in the bowl. What did I miss?"

Rogue barked a few times at me and started spinning in a circle. A light clicked on in my brain as I showed him a picture on my cell phone of Peta. He put his paws forward and howled.

"Ahhhh, you and me both. I want to see her as much as you do, boy. You pining for her?" As I lifted the cell phone up and brought it to my face he got a side swipe of a lick on the screen. "Licking my screen won't bring her here, that's a little on the gross side."

The key to my furry friend's problem was the same as mine. We both wanted to see Peta.

TEN

RIP

"Sorry so many things have gotten in the way of us getting together. We have so much going on at the animal shelter that it's driving me crazy."

"You look like you're about to pull your hair out." I was trying play it cool, but we did keep missing one another.

"I am, I'm telling you, but I wanted to invite you and Rogue to a Paw Walk and we can catch up then. What do you think?"

"I think me and Rogue are going to be front and center in that walk. We'll be right on it." Rogue's piercing bark let it be known that he agreed. "You hear that? We got a winner." I ruffled up his hair with my knuckles as Rogue pushed his head against my hand.

"Ohhh Rogue, I miss you. Can't wait to see you bud. And you too Rip. It's going to start at the dog park and wrap around the surrounding streets. It's not a long walk. It's for two miles or so."

"I think my legs will hold out that long. What do you think Rogue? Can we handle it?" Rogue howled in appreciation as I chuckled into the phone. "I think that's a yes."

"Okay. As per usual I have to go because I have some things to take care of here at the shelter with new animals coming through." Her background noise made that clear.

"I can hear. See you for the Paw Walk."

IT'S Paw Walk Day and it's time for Rogue to showcase all he's learned as a pup. We have our little morning routine down pat. I yawn my way into the kitchen, pour his dry and wet food. Reach for the coffee pot and try to wipe the sleep from my eyes struggling until I can get the first drop down my throat. Rogue yelps at me until I take him out for his romp around the neighborhood where he can sniff out every other dog's butt hole and call that a friendship. Trips me out that they do that. His healthy doggy dumps had me carrying a plastic bag around my wrist like the proud dog Dad I was.

Santa Fe's morning crisp was turned all the way up and me and Rogue were rugged up. I put him in his doggy jacket and I was in my biker jacket so the chill wouldn't cut through. I picked two coffees along the way. There was a registration table and without a

doubt Peta was walking towards it. "Your hair gives you away every time." Her hand turned from the trestle table as she looked around to my grinning face with a coffee in hand.

"I know, hard to hide with this mop," she said in a playful self-deprecating tone.

"I love your hair. It's beautiful." I thrust the coffee forward as Rogue started the wagging brigade and began barking excitedly. Other dogs that were on leashes around us started to bark back saying hello and pulling away to join in with Rogue. I reared back a little calming Rogue as he settled after a couple of barks.

"Rogue sounds like he is ready to walk. Alright Rogue we are going to get you on your way." One of the organizers at the table grinned as I took hold of a pen and signed into the walk.

Peta was grinning at Rogue and his friskiness. I knuckle rubbed his head.

"Rogue is rearing to go this morning." Peta observed as she patted Rogue's fur softly.

"He is." Seeing Peta with her cheery grin brought my morning alive and I found that the wake-up juice I had in my hand wasn't needed so much.

Peta dropped down behind the desk to pick up a megaphone and I assumed she was going to gather everyone and get the walk started. We had fifteen minutes to go and some of the morning dog walkers looked mighty serious in their running tights and tops to be walking their dogs.

Before she spoke into the microphone she spoke to me. "Hey, if you line up with all the other walkers at the start line we'll be getting started in another five minutes."

"Cool, see you after the walk."

"Yep, you will."

Me and my trusty pooch walked over to the start line in preparation for the dog walk. A foghorn went off and that set the dogs off. The owners had enough restraint on their animals to stop it happening. I found myself smiling, never in a million years did I think I would find myself at a dog walk. That's the last place that I thought I would find myself. Bikes, fishing, cars, women, seedy bars, but a dog walk? No, not Rip, but minds change, and I found myself being happy that I stepped outside of my comfort zone.

Rogue and I walked comfortably together and all of the training I'd done with him came shining through. Rogue was a perfect gentleman of a dog with a few poop drops along the way, but that was nothing new for him. By the time we got back I felt pretty good and like I wanted to move on and go fishing. The crispness in the air had thawed out a notch and switched up to be a nice day with just the right amount of sunshine. I didn't have one thought about Derek and his retaliation methods that filtered through my mind. Peta's energy had something to do with that.

After the walk she met me in the middle of the oval back at the main starting point. "Me and my pooch are having a little rest right here."

"You look pretty good resting there. Did you enough the walk?"

I looked up at her as I dropped my sunglasses down on my face. "Yep. We had a great time on the walk. We're actually thinking about going fishing, would you care to join us?"

"I have to pack up a few things, but I do want to come. I want to see where this



hidden fishing spot is that you seem to love going to. I'm warning you though I'm not a pro fisherman. Is that okay?"

"That's completely okay. I have a few tricks to get you started." Spending the rest of the day with Peta felt like it would be the best way to end it.

"Sounds like I'm in good hands then. Give me twenty minutes max and then I will join you and Rogue." I leaned back on my elbows on the grass with a smile. We will be waiting right here for you. I watched as her long, determined strides moved away from me to the registration desk.

She stayed true to her word and met me twenty minutes later. I was aching to kiss her, it felt like so long since I'd seen her so I wanted to let her know the fire was still burning for her as she stood at her bike. Her beauty, not her outer beauty but her true inner beauty, lay right in front of me and it was a wonderful thing to see. She swept her fire red ringlets away from her face as her candy pink lips curved ever so slightly into a smile. Rogue was on the lead sitting peacefully beside me. I pulled her in towards me and fulfilled the wish I'd had for the last couple of weeks to kiss her. Her responsiveness eased my doubts that we were off track. It was just that both of us were busy.

"Are you still having those troublesome dreams you been having?"

The hint of frown formed on her face. "Not so many. Slowly they are fading away. I think I have a handle on them."

Softly I rubbed her back as Rogue leaned his body weight against her. She responded by tinkering with the tuft of fur on top of his head. "Good I was getting a little worried there about it."

"Don't be worried about it. I don't know it was crazy. It was like I was there- back there again."

"Shit, sounds heavy."

"It was." I noticed Peta trembling as I said it and wished I didn't kill the mood and bring it up. "Anyway, they've calmed down now. Let's go fishing. Are you going to bring Rogue?"

"Nah, I think we can spend time by ourselves. I'm going to put him in the backyard, he likes it there roaming around."

"Cool." We rode steadily back to my house and I invited her in while I organized all the fishing gear, blankets and a few little snacks for us to eat. Once I got them organized we set up to go to my favorite fishing spot. We drove in comfortable silence admiring the foothills of the Santa Fe mountains whirring by as I tapped my hands on the steering wheel feeling as good as I could be. I wasn't a prisoner anymore I was out in the open and free. Derek had been served with a dose of his own medicine and he wasn't enjoying it on the way down. The Guardians chopping up his cars might have been the last straw and too much for him to tackle and coming to the warehouse was a bad idea.

We pulled into the gravel driveway as I got the bait that was needed and moved to my spot.

"Here we go, one fishing rod for the newbie and one rod for me." I grinned at her as she looked at the rod as if it was an alien space craft from out of space.

"It's okay I'll show you what to do." The day was sweet and so was the air, it was me

and Peta at the rushing river. She was flowing clean and crystal blue between the crevices of the jagged rocks and I could see the same awe in her eyes, the same look she had when I first discovered the place. It was a place of saving grace for me when I got out of prison.

I stood behind Peta whispering in her ear as I helped her attach the bait to the end of the hook. "Like this?" The heat from her fingers transferred to mine and I felt myself get hard as I helped her put the shiny bauble that attracted the fish on the end of the line.

"Just like that," I said softly as I nipped at her ear. The way I was feeling gave me other ideas and I didn't know much fishing we were going to get done.

"Okay, now let her fly," I directed her as the transparent wire flew out over the water and plopped in a stream of flowing water. "That's it!" I praised like an over enthusiastic teacher. I loved people experiencing the joy of fishing.

"What do we do now?" she asked as I laughed.

"We wait. Enjoy nature. Thinking time out here."

"Wow. Okay."

"Not good with silence? We can talk some."

"No, I think I like it out here. It's very serene. So different to being at the animal shelter where I have so much noise all around me."

"Thought you might like the change," I prompted wondering what she was thinking in her mind about me and her.

"It is. I do like it out here." We fished and we talked for a while longer, we didn't catch any fish, but we got to know one another. The spot I took her too was in a secluded spot so nobody could see us. It was just me and Peta in the wilderness.

"I got some snacks. I know it feels like it was a waste of time, but that's fishing some days. Some days the fish aren't biting." I bent down to pull out a few things and put the rug out under us.

"That's okay. Even if they aren't biting I'm happy being here with you." Her admitting that did something to my self esteem. Now I didn't feel like we were so out of one another's league. She was Peta to me and I hoped I was down to earth good guy - well mostly good guy Rip.

We stood face to face as her hands drifted to back of my neck and she ran her hands through my fingers. "I like your hair."

"Yeah, I like it a little longer. I'm not looking forward to thinning or losing it."

She chuckled a little as I stroked her hair. My lips were longing for hers and it was times like this I wished I'd trimmed my moustache. It was a little unruly, but she knew about that. She knew I was a little on the unkempt side. I stared deeply into her crystal blue eyes as the fire kindled between us. I put up my hands as we latched them together and the sunlight tingled on the ends of them. Everything about Peta felt like home. My passion was overruling and I wanted to lay down with her on the blanket.

"Lay down with me," I coaxed as her eyes transfixed me. We both dropped down to the blanket. Birds were flying overhead as we sunk to the blanket. We kept kissing and were so enraptured with one another that our clothes peeling off one item at a time didn't even occur to us both. Flesh to flesh we explored one another. My hands ran over

her hot flesh travelling down her flat stomach stopping at the little downey hairs near her belly button. My hands found their way down the front of her pants as she panted lightly at my touch. There was no turning back as her eyes flashed open.

"Do you have protection?" she asked in a tiny voice.

"Yeah, I think I got something somewhere." We were grown folks, but I didn't want her feeling like I was sleeping with other people so I let her know I didn't have that many on me. "Probably old. Check my jacket."

She smiled into my face and that woman's intuition kicked in. "It's okay Rip." She rambled around for a minute in my jacket pocket and pulled out a condom wrapper with the edges of it that were dog eared. I adjusted the other blanket to cover her. We might have been secluded, but other fisherman were out and around from time to time.

"You okay to do this?" I asked her to make sure.

"Yes, come on. We might get caught."

"Does that turn you on?" I asked her as I ran my tongue around the top of her pretty earlobe. Her ears were so cute and just the right shape to me.

"Yes it does. It's exciting," she breathed. Her ripe lips kissing mine reminded me of tasting candy floss. A warm rush of fire ran through my veins as we laid down in the blanket. There was no awkwardness just a peace between us as she bit her bottom lip and helped me undo my belt buckle. My throbbing cock sprang out of the jeans as I wriggled out of them and her warm bare feet pushed the rest of my jeans all the way down. Only me and my underwear were left. I tugged down her snug fitting jeans next as they moved to the ground. I drank in another kiss under the sun's rays as she dropped my Hanes boxer briefs to the bottom of the blanket. I could hear the slow trickle of the water behind us and it made everything feel surreal between us. Birds called above us as if they wanted us to mate. It was a feeling like no other between us.

I cupped one of her round, pert mounds in my hand and dipped my mouth greedily to run the broad part of my tongue across it. She whimpered in delight as she watched the motion. No words just watching me pleasure her. My thumbs tweaked a little as I moved over to the next breast stroking and caressing the other. Watching her chest rise and fall was a beautiful thing. I moved my hand down to her panties which was the last thing to come off. I opened her folds softly dipping my hand into her warm, liquidy core. She was hot and ready for me. I rolled on top of her as she parted her legs and wrapped her hands around my neck as he kissed and I rocked in motion inside of her. I flowed in and out of her body as the water rushed behind us. I found her soft, swollen nub with one hand as I probed deeper inside of her.

As I applied pressure and rode her through a wave of sensations with my cock I felt the small shudder of her under me as she came. Her cheeks were now matching her hair and there was a light flush of a glow on her face. Her flush brought a smile to my face as I linked my hands with hers sprinkling light kisses on her face as I rocked inside of her. Her eyes widened as I sped up and she locked her legs around my back and my thrusts increased along with my grunting. Felt so good inside her, I couldn't hold it back any longer as I let my orgasm take me over. I released a sigh as I dropped onto her chest. I could feel her heartbeat. It was running wild inside.

We both giggled as we rolled together in the blanket. "Well that was an unexpected." I arched my eyebrows at her.

"A good one."

"I can second that." Now the ending of the day. A beautiful woman and a rough and tumble guy wrapped up in a blanket near a running stream with the sun shining on our sated bodies. Pretty good day for fishing if you asked me.

"THE FLASHES ARE BACK." I was still high off me and Peta's river side escapade but her calling me with these flashes was starting to freak me out. It was the next day and I was back to fixing bikes at the clubhouse listening to Peta with her weird dreams.

"What are you seeing? Can you see anything?" She sounded scared and I didn't even know how to help her with her feelings.

"I'm seeing a man in a balaclava. I wish they would go away. I don't know why they're coming up now."

"You should come down here tomorrow, the old ladies are going to be here. You can come chill out, relax a little bit. Maybe that dream is trying to tell you something. I mean I'm no psychologist. Seems kinda freaky and I'm sorry about the home invasion happening to you."

Peta recounting her childhood dreams brought me back to my shady past and all the shame I carried from it, but it was over now and there was nothing I could do about it now. No point crying salty tears into a bourbon glass about it. I had shake off the shackles of the past and work in the future.

ELEVEN

RIP

Things were good in the Santa Fe chapter. They were working out well, the expansion was well and truly a success. When I came into the club mid week Mickey had a pencil perched behind his ear and he was talking to himself.

"You know, they say talking to yourself is the first sign of madness." He was too busy counting things up and plugging them into his calculator that he didn't hear me. Either that or it was selective hearing because he was attempting to concentrate.

"Yo!" I called at him again and Mickey smiled and continued to keep counting out his numbers.

"I hear you, I hear you. Let me finish this. I have to balance this spreadsheet, because if what I'm looking at is right, we just made another three thousand on the bar over two nights. That's insane. We are getting some real money through here." Mickey made a trombone sound with his lips as his visibly tired eyes widened as he confirmed the numbers. "Whoo! Yep, I'm right! We got three thousand dollars the same night of the band trial through her and then the next night overflow. We got it made here. I'm going to need a pay raise." Mickey chuckled as Mustang came over.

"Nice work, Mickey. I didn't know you were such a whiz with the numbers," I observed. "You're making your mark behind the bar. This is really your thing. You've made it that."

"Thanks, I had no idea that I would love being behind the bar so much. I don't do too bad." He shrugged his now filled out shoulders. He was starting to morph from this weak looking guy to this solid and physically well built man and it was tripping me out. His transformation started from the time he was with Tabitha and it seemed like them living together was having a good effect on him.

"Good job, Mickey. How are we looking over the bar? I know we had a massive influx of people since that local band showed up here," Mustang pointed out.

"We are looking real good. I was just telling Rip that we are up by three thousand dollars."

"Three grand? We need to get that secretary in here sooner rather than later." Mustang looked like he was a little more under pressure these days.

"You got some candidates coming through?"

"I have a couple of guys that I'm feeling out and one of them is coming to the club in the next few minutes. Are you sticking around? Maybe you can give me your input on

them.”

“Sure will. I’m here for the next little bit. I just got here.”

“Great.”

“Where did you source them from? That’s always a good clue to start from and what kind of bikes do they ride? That right there is another valuable insight.”

Mustang grinned and a dimple formed in his smile. “Both of those are excellent questions. One of them I met at the Violet bar and he expressed interest to me after seeing him in there for the last few weeks. The other one Stunt knows through his entertainment channels. He’s at a loose end right now and looking for a place to land.”

I listened hard to Mustang, it would be hard to tell until I saw their faces. “And their bikes?” I asked as Mickey tried to figure out where I was coming from.

“Rip. I don’t have a lineup of their bikes. We are going to have to play the wait and see game,” Mustang replied as I noted the tense ripple in his arm. Standing next to Mustang made me want to stop smoking entirely. That along with Peta. I figured most men would feel a little inferior to the likes of him, Axle and Breaker. I had my own brand of rough around the edges appeal and I was mighty grateful that Peta liked the leaner variety of men.

Mustang tapped the top of the bar as his eyes stared out into the street and he walked off.

Mickey put down the sheet that he’d been counting the numbers on. “How confident are you about these guys, Rip? I’m worried we’re going to have another situation like we did with Stunt. Another dead body. We can’t do that again. I can’t go through that. Shit makes my stomach twist thinking about it.” Mickey was carrying the residual from an inside perpetrator trying to infiltrate our turf. I wasn’t a man to carry too much of the past with me if I could help it. I liked to move on as quickly as possible. The only haunting nightmare was the one I was locked in with Derek and to me that was over.

“I’m pretty damn confident. If I so much as smell them being assholes I will let Mustang know. We gotta trust him, Mickey. He’s ex- Special Forces and he’s our president. He’s not going to lead us to a hole. Why you worried?”

“I don’t know. We never seem to have too long of a break where we can just chill as a club. There’s always something going down at the club,” Mickey rightfully observed.

“Welcome to being part of a motorcycle club. This shit ain’t for the faint, but that’s why it’s important to trust your brothers even when things look a little shaky. We got it, Mickey. You know from your time on the street who looks to be good or not. You got the same gut instinct Hawk does. Trust it and use it. You see anything off about these guys, you speak up and tell Mustang.”

“You’re right.”

Time passed by quickly as I fueled up with a drink and I tapped Mickey as that familiar guttural firepower of a bike entered our territory. I nodded at him as an unspoken confirmation of what we just talked about. One bike only and a man with a thin goatee and an all the way around the neck tattoo of a blue butterfly that seemed unusual for a man to have. Black leather jacket, gray shirt, blue jeans and about my height. He had some paperwork in his hand and his gelled back black hair was putting me off right away.

I stood up off the bar as Mustang stepped out to the front as he heard the bike. "Hey, am I in the right place? This is the Guardians' spot right?"

"That depends on who's asking," I chuckled as the guy who I saw when he got closer had blue eyes.

"Ha. You must be Rip. I heard about you. I'm Johnson. I met Mustang down at the Violet Bar. I've seen you come in there a few times. I haven't seen you lately though."

"You sound like my old parole officer. You know all my whereabouts and I don't know yours." My tone was thick and deadpan. I threw in the criminal part so he knew I wasn't above getting down and dirty, even though I figured myself to be reformed for the most part.

"Ha, the parole officer. What did you go in for?" he asked lightly as he moved his paperwork from one side of his arm to the other.

"Gutting a man like a fish." The side of my mouth was twitching because I was itching to laugh and all I wanted to do was see if he balked. I wanted to know if he could hold ground. Mustang joined the introductions at that part and our guest looked down at the warehouse floor. I'd made him uncomfortable without too much effort and I didn't think that was a good sign.

"Take it easy, Rip. Let's give our guest a little breathing room before you break him in."

I ran my hand down my pants and offered my hand to him. "I'm sorry, my dark humor is coming through. Mostly true - just not the gutting fish part. It was far worse." Johnson shook my hand and I could feel the glugginess of it in my hand.

"Funny guy," he replied. My eyes followed them to the area where the couches were near the coffee machine and I looked at Mickey.

"Don't like him. He's weak and what will he do if we get in trouble? He's no Scout that's for sure. Scout is sharp and will get in and rumble. This guy can't rumble." My judgments were coming through, but I didn't trust the Johnson guy.

"You can't make that assumption. Look at Doc. He's nerdy, conservative and a family man. You would never know he was the money and numbers guy for a motorcycle club."

"Doc is different, he's loyal and he's a special breed, that guy. He's got a background with MCs and he's easy to check out."

"You're crazy, Rip. You gutted a guy? You don't have the guts to do that. You're full of it, too."

"You're right, I don't have the guts to do that. Makes me sick to think about it, but he doesn't know that."

"You are off, Rip. What if he's legit?"

"What if he's not, Mickey?"

"Rip."

The speculation ended there for the first guy. I got back to work with a new fantasy in my mind. Peta was down by the river and now every time I fished I would be able to think about having her butt naked and moaning right out in the open. A nice juicy memory for me to enjoy the day with.

I watched as I saw Johnson's feet leave on the way out about twenty minutes later.



Good. That's where he needed to go and that's where he needed to stay. Gone. I patted down the upholstery in the car and stuck my head out to go over and talk to Mustang. Stunt and Gunner were now strolling in. The closer we were to the afternoon the more Guardians that filled the space.

"You look confused."

"Not so much. I wanted Johnson to come in here so I could check into him a little more. I had some iffy feelings about him. A few things that he said didn't match up."

"What did he say?"

"He told me that he'd been attached to four other motorcycle clubs and that made me question why he would have to move around so much."

"Told ya. Something off with him. When's the next guy coming in to be on the chopping block?"

"He's gonna be here any minute. In fact, I think he just walked in." I looked up hearing the low hum of a motorcycle.

"Ah, he's a sporty guy. Look at the bike. Him and Stunt can be friends." As soon as the guy walked in I felt a whole lot better about him. He looked like a friendly enough sort of guy.

Just a normal guy, not so shiesty looking like the last guy. Dark hair, a scruffy likeable look. He was casual in his walk, as well. Nothing fake about him. "Hi, you must be Rip." He reached out his gloved hand to me.

"How come everybody knows my name?"

"Ah, I gotta be honest and say I know you from the Santa Fe grapevine. From your younger years. I've been around here a long time and you used to run with a couple of friends of mine."

My face drained of color because I didn't know what friends he was referring to. "What friends are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about friends that I used to fish with. I don't fish much anymore, I don't have the time. Barry and Sef, you know them?"

The color returned to my face. "Ah, those guys. Yep. I remember them. We used to fish off an old bridge over the back of Santa Fe."

"That's right, you did." He shook my hand with a bright smile as Mickey stood up from behind the bar. He was setting up and getting ready for bar service and the music was already drifting through the speakers in the background.

"I'm Crow, that's what they call me. Jason is my real name."

Mustang was standing beside me by the time he introduced himself to Mickey. "Better," I said under my breath.

"Good to know." A smug grin preceded as I milled around the bar and him and Mustang moved over to the couch to talk some more. Breaker strolled in just as Crow was leaving out of the warehouse.

"Nice to meet you guys. I might be back down here for a drink soon."

"Good man. Good luck," Breaker said to him as he left.

"Is he a good guy, Rip?"

"He's got potential." Hard to get a real feel for the guy until he showed up at the club

a little more. To me it was a good start that he knew of my old high school fishing buddies, we had some wild times out there on the bridge. We used to fish rain, hail or shine. My obsession with fishing wasn't the same anymore. I'd grown out of it a little bit. I had my fishing spot, and now that it had been christened by Peta and I was about to be the holy fishing ground.

As the afternoon sun faded and the crew got ready to open the doors for patrons to come into the bar, I thought about Peta and me. She had me wanting to take the next step with her and I was open to at least seeing where it could go. I thought we had enough in common despite the age gap to make it work. In fact, our age difference never came up between us in conversation.

People trickled in for the night and it went from being empty to the place being half full with patrons in every nook and cranny. All of the crew were looking at one another as if we couldn't believe it. This was something we had never experienced. The whole place being wall to wall full. I had to keep a closer eye on the patrons.

The buzz in the clubhouse now turned bar was incredible. People were on the dancefloor gyrating and having fun tearing it up. The pinball machine was being well used and I could hear the ping of the ball, and the prostitutes were back at the door. Mustang was occupied at the back of the bar speaking to Gunner about something and it looked pretty intense. It was me and Breaker blocking them from coming into the space.

The brunette one from our last meeting was chewing bubble gum and she blew a large bubble and blew it into my face. "Ladies, you're back again for more. We told you last time that we weren't going to let you come in here if you were going to solicit our patrons."

Her features were hard and sullen, from what she was presenting I figured she wasn't enjoying the job none. "We didn't come here for that. Trust me, we did come to talk to you about a proposition. It's lit inside. Look at it!" she exclaimed to one of the other women in the group as her eyes widened like it was Christmas and the tree lights had just been put up.

"What's your proposition?" Breaker spread his feet apart as the brunette went into sappy sweet mode and a whole row of teeth shone back at us.

"Ever thought about making that dance floor into a strip club? All you need is a pole. I'm a businesswoman and I came here to do business with the Guardians." She boosted up her breasts and put her hands on her hips dramatically as she looked to the girls on either side of her for moral support. They were backing her up in this crazy idea of hers.

"Mustang is not going to go for that. We aren't that type of club. Now if you go see the seedy motorcycle gang - the Devils of Destruction then they might be able to help you with that," Breaker confirmed with a wicked snicker.

"This is so unfair! Can't you let us in for a drink?" The brunette lifted her eyes to the target which was to get inside the clubhouse. Breaker put two fingers over her abdominals to hold her back lightly. The ferocity in his eyes let her know he wasn't about to let her inside.

"Nope, you will not get inside." Breaker shook his head as his cold eyes put the stamp on it.

I watched the exchange with Breaker confident he had it under control. None of the other women were budging, they were looking mighty hard at me as if I might be the weak link and they could sneak past me, but my reflexes were still working pretty good these days. The boom of Mustang's voice could be heard over the music as his large frame stepped out into the night.

"Ladies, you cannot come in. That's not what we do in here. Now if I was confident you would sit at the bar and just enjoy yourselves I would change my mind." The brunette ring leader opened her mouth to speak. "But, I'm not confident that's what you will do. I don't think you will do that at all."

"I was just telling this here gentleman that we wanted to offer our dancing services. I have a group of twelve of us that would be good to go and we could really turn this place into something special."

"Are you high?" Mustang asked her as one of the girls with her gasped. Mustang crossed his boulder like arms and barricaded with his body.

"How dare you! We are trying to help the community. It's a service and we can provide it somewhere else." Breaker was about to break into laughter but he was holding it in.

"You are providing a service, but we don't want those services here. We are soon to become a live music venue so that's not gonna work here." Mustang made his position clear to the ladies as the ringleader's face dropped.

"Come on girls. We can do better anyway." All three of us stood over the doorway and waited for them to leave. The ringleader did one last look over her shoulder and left with her girls.

"This bar is going to need a pretty special name, because it attracts some real characters," I said as I stared up at the stars in the night sky.

"You got that right," Mustang seconded.

TWELVE

## PETA

Paws and Claws was receiving an influx of animals at the top of the week. We were having a hard time finding extra kennels for our resident cats, kittens, puppies and dogs. This kept me on the phone for the first half of the morning seeking out foster homes and with a twitch pulling at my left eye from stress.

One of our best vets, Sheila, came to the front counter. "We are going to have to send some of these people away. I can't believe I'm saying this. I can't accommodate all these animals right now. Where did they come from all of a sudden?" I vented to her.

"Your guess is as good as mine. We have a lot of standard checks to do this week. Nothing major so maybe I can help out and ring around to foster homes and stuff. Would that help, Peta?"

"Would you? My god, that would be the best. I'm freaking out more than a little bit."

The vet rubbed my shoulders as I handed her a clipboard with a list of animals on it. "Here's a list of twenty so far that I have to find foster homes for really quickly. We have a database of over 400, but it's a matter of going through and seeing who they are compatible with. It's all in the system."

"Yikes! I'm going to require coffee for this."

"That will help for sure." Once I handed all the information over to her I got back to hitting the phones and ringing sister shelters to see if they had any room for all the displaced animals that were coming through for the week.

By the time lunch came I was already exhausted and craved the sunshine on my face. I headed out back to the picnic table with my wilted lettuce leaves and soggy tomato which made me feel even worse. As I munched into it I thought about the budding relationship I was having with Rip and the nightmares that surfaced about the same time he came into my life. Seemed like a funny coincidence and there was a sinking feeling that it would end up being another woeful dating experience in my life and I would be back on the apps swiping left. This was the millennial wave of times. I bit into my sandwich attempting to quell the hunger pangs I didn't know I had from running around all morning.

Rip was being so attentive and messaging me every morning. I couldn't lie and say it didn't feel good. I found myself digging for my cell phone to see his messages and cheer myself up.

Morning Peta. Rogue and I say hi. I laughed out loud nearly choking on a lodged piece of my sandwich as his MMS came through with Rogue's soft white paw held up to the screen with the tongue wagging out. There was that. I would talk to the girls about it. Maybe they would have some wisdom about the situation. I messaged him back with a picture of my soggy sandwich and a sad face with a smile. We did have this special little thing going on.

My sandwich got a little better and I got up from the picnic bench and moved inside the animal shelter to go back to work. The afternoon was as hectic as the morning and by the time the evening hit at five all I wanted to do was ride out on my bike and not come back.

Sheila looked weary by the time she came back to the reception desk with the clipboard, but when she handed the information back to me it showed that she had ticked off nearly all the animals. "You did it! You got all these animals foster homes." Sheila nodded proudly.

"Mostly, there's a couple on the list that you will need to follow up phone calls for. I couldn't get a hold of them." I was so happy that I jogged out of my spot from behind the desk and pounced on Sheila with a hug.

"You're welcome. That's what we do here. We're a team."

"We sure are. I can go home stress free now."

"You can, did you manage to get through the list that you had?"

"Same like you. Mostly, but there are a few pups that need a home. I'm going to try again tomorrow morning and see how it goes."

"Good plan. Are you knocking off now? You should get out of here." Sheila was one of the more nurturing of the vets and tried to push me out of the door because she knew how passionate I was about animals.

"I am. I'm going now. I'm done for today."

"Great, start packing up your stuff." Sheila hustled me from behind the desk. "I've heard you say this before and then you end up staying for another two hours."

"Bad habit of mine. Okay. Let's go." I did pack up and I had my pow wow with the girls to look forward to. We walked out with dusk hitting the sky and said our goodbyes. I dipped back home letting the Santa Fe wind blast across my face waking me back up.

Jumping in the shower I got out refreshed and ready to see my girls. I rode over to the clubhouse and parked next to all the other bad ass women riders. I walked in and Michaela gave me a big windshield wiper wave. Robin, who was still peeling her riding gloves and helmet off gave me a peck on the cheek.

"Hey, good to see you. How's the shelter and everything?"

"The shelter is good, crazy as usual, so many displaced animals today, but I feel like by the end of the day we got a handle on it."

"I've always admired what you do at the shelter. It's incredible. You are my hero. If I ever want another pet sister or brother for Morty I will be coming to you." Robin owned a very opinionated Shih Tzu with a whole lot of attitude.

"Morty is two dogs in one. He's a whole lot of dog. It will be hard for him to share."

"I can agree with you there. I'm pretty sure that he's a Leo." I giggled and went over

to sit with the other girls at the table. Lisa, Gerry and Willow each had a soft drink in their hand.

I looked at the cans thinking I wanted to opt for something heavier. I opened the fridge and pulled out a light beer and came back to the table. Willow observed me for a moment.

"Hard day?"

"Hard..." I flipped the top off my beer. "That's not the word, a lot of effort, yes."

Willow nodded as the cool beer glided down my thankful throat. "How about you?"

Willow sighed. "Nothing too much from my end, work is boring. That's why I have a bike, I need some excitement in my life."

"Speaking of excitement, I'm not so sure that I feel any excitement about Rip. I don't know if I'm mixed up about him or not." I talked to the girls straight and I didn't beat around the bush.

"Is the honeymoon phase over already? Does he seem like a steady guy? Maybe you're not used to that?" Willow said.

"I don't know about that, Willow. If you know you know. Maybe the spark's not there," Gerry challenged. She was on the upper end of her twenties and had been in a long term relationship for three years. "I'm still hot for my man. He does it for me." Gerry wasn't one to spare the details and we all knew that. Willow cleared her throat.

"Ahem! We do not need to know about your dirty weekend humping on the dryer. The imagery is not for me, Gerry," Willow said in a loud voice.

Gerry laughed at Willow. "Oh Willow, you are such a prude!"

"Prude is the last thing I am. What I am is discreet. There's a difference," Willow retorted.

"Both of you, you're supposed to be helping me with my dismal dating life," I whined.

"But your life is not dismal, you're dating a kick ass road captain from the Guardians. What did we miss?" Michaela added. The more she spoke the more I felt confused about what she was saying.

"I know. It's the strangest thing. I don't even get it. I've been having these weird flashbacks about the robbery when I was a kid. I don't know how to explain things. I'm a little mixed up." Willow, who was sitting to my left started to rub my back.

"Sorry about the flashbacks. That's not good. What are they of?"

"It's the robbery itself." All of the girls knew what I'd gone through when I was younger and I was over it, but now the memories were resurfacing and it was making me question how over it I really was. The room went a little silent as I talked about it, but Willow put her hand on mine and it made me feel a little better.

"We're here for you. Maybe it's not about the robbery at all- might be about something else, do you think?" Michaela asked as she crushed the Coke can she had in front of her.

"Might be. I don't know," I replied. "I want to talk to my parents about it. I never asked them if they still think about that night. Sorry to be a buzz kill, friends."

"Hey, that's why we formed this club so we could be there for one another. We are the Santa Fe Rumlbers. We rumble together through thick and thin."

I giggled at Michaela making up her own little version of a slogan. "Is that our new theme? Rumbling together? We sound like WWF wrestlers."

Me and the girls broke out into laughter and the mood instantly lightened. As always I felt better getting these things off my chest.

Having that heart to heart with the girls as I rode home that night settled my feelings down and once my mind cleared of its hazy fog I found myself wanting to talk to Rip and end the night with his voice on my mind. I called him on my cell phone as I laid back on my bed.

"Hi Rip."

"Hey, nice to hear your voice." Rogue's yap perforated the phone.

"Nice to hear yours, too. I liked that photo that you sent of you and Rogue. He is so cute. He's grown a lot, too."

"You only saw part of his paw. I have to go get his nails clipped. They're getting long."

"Bring him into the shelter and we can do it." Any time I got to see the animals that were in our care come back made my job worthwhile.

"Okay, I will. How are you really, though, Peta? Are you still having those nightmares?"

"Umm. Not as much, but every now and then, yeah... I'm okay. I'm sure they'll pass." I brushed it off, but I didn't know if they would pass or not.

"I want to tell you something. I don't want you freaking out or nothing. I told you how I went to prison for a crime I didn't commit right?"

"Yes." I was still lying down on my bed but my body started to feel prickly from him talking about his prison time.

"Well, there was a guy named Derek that I used to run with and him and I used to do some small time robberies. I'm finding it hard to tell you because I know you've been struggling for the last little while. I'm sorry for all I've done in the past." As soon as he said the name Derek my stomach folded over itself into a tight knot.

"Derek? You were a robber?" I gulped down my fear. I wanted to be brave and listen to what he had to say. I knew he went to prison, but he said it was for a crime he didn't commit.

"You-you never told me it was for robbery, why wouldn't you tell me that when you know I've been having nightmares about them?"

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to keep it from you. Dammit. I didn't want you to freak out." He released a heavy sigh. "I don't want to scare you. I wanted to just tell you so you know who I am. I care about you a lot, Peta, I really do. I'm trying to make things right," he pleaded, but the grip of the tightly balled knot in my stomach would not unbundle itself. I put my hand over my stomach and tried to release it as my fingers started to tingle .

"I am scared Rip... really scared."



THIRTEEN

RIP

I was talking to Peta on the phone and the guilt was too much, and her talking about the memory of the robbery she experienced made me want to bear my soul and my deadliest sin to her. If I was going to be all in and get the girl that's what I felt I had to do.

"Peta. I'm not a robber anymore. I'm trying to be honest with you. I want to see you, let's talk about this." I wasn't giving up just because we were at hurdle.

"I need some time to think about things, Rip. Next week I'm freed up. I know the two things are unrelated, but that night the robbers came changed my family's life forever. I can't ignore that." She was shaking on the phone and I could hear it in her voice.

"That's understandable, and the last thing I want to do is make you afraid again. I was an asshole back then and I drank too much. Just causing trouble for no reason. I'm not that man anymore. Believe me. Let me show you, Peta." The groveling was still going on and I wasn't ashamed. I wanted her to be a part of my life, and if I had to bide my time then that's what I would do. I knew a little something about biding my time on the inside. Every day was a repeat process of the next day and the next day. Your eyes and ears had to be open at all times in order to survive, so Peta needing a few days to cool off was okay by me.

"Thanks, and I appreciate you being honest with me, I do. Say hi to Rogue for me."

"I will. Say good night to Percy for me. He's right beside me." I looked down at Rogue. "It's Peta, say goodnight, Rogue." Woof! Woof! "There's a good boy. Aren't you, Rogue?"

"He is. Percy is napping beside me. Must suck to be a cat. Goodnight Rip. I'll talk to you later." Her voice was distant and already I could feel her slipping out of my fingers, but if she was going to fade away then that's what it would be.

If that Back to the Future time travel machine could come back and pick me up I would get inside it and travel back to the day I met Derek. I would go talk to my younger self and walk myself right out of that Santa Fe diner where he had a crowd of young dumb men crowded around him as he boasted about robbing and conning people. I would take the admiration right out of my eyes that I had for him.

I went to sleep that night with Peta on my mind and I woke up with her on it, as well. Normally I would send her a text good morning, it had become this thing between us and now I was second guessing myself and not wanting to send it for fear of pushing her off the edge of the cliff that we were already on.

Instead I rolled through the motions with Rogue and fixed his food up, hit the shower and hit the road over to the clubhouse to find some way to keep myself occupied. I knew for certain there were two bikes that were due for service and I wanted to knock them out. When I got to the warehouse the radio was playing, and it was only Mickey humming to himself in the kitchen. Relief washed through me because I didn't feel like talking to anybody else.

"Mickey. You're in early. You knock out those two bikes?" I wasn't in the mood to play as Mickey stirred his coffee and looked at me.

"Nah, I haven't touched those. I'm working on the old Buick. It's a classic, never seen anything like it. You alright?" Mickey asked as I slammed the cabinet door and found a spare mug to make my coffee.

"Trying to take my mind off some things with Peta. I might have messed it up, Mickey."

"How? I thought you were going good?"

I spooned in the sugar and let the machine produce my wake up juice. "We were till I had to open up my big mouth trying to be the bigger man in redemption. I don't know why I did that."

"Redemption? What did you do, Rip?" Mickey asked, flicking his brown hair out of his eyes.

"The robbery thing. I told her some stuff." Came out rough like I was feeling.

"First off, you got it bad." Mickey ruffled me up and elbowed me.

"Didn't know it was this bad." Sucking in the smell of the coffee I thought about it some more.

"Creeps up on you, don't worry about it. That's how it was for me and Tabitha. I didn't know if we were going to make it, either."

"I don't know. I wanted to be transparent with her and look how it backfired." I knew how I sounded. I made it sound as if I was feeling sorry for myself and I didn't want to be bitching and moaning.

"She'll come around, Rip. Don't stress out about it."

"I hope you're right. I need to get to work so I can have something to do to keep my mind balanced. Not that it ever was. That bastard Derek better never set foot in here, ever."

"Chin up. She'll come right back. You're irresistible, Rip."

"Mickey, if you ever call me irresistible again I'm going to have to get my hunting knife and cut that hair that keeps flapping over your eye."

"That's not what you're going to do. Leave my hair out of it. Tabitha likes it long. She thinks I could be a rock star like her."

I snorted at Mickey. "Mickey, I've heard you sing and if I ever hear you singing on stage I will do you the favor of pulling you off there."

"Thanks, you don't have faith in my abilities. What about a little Bon Jovi? What about Blaze of Glory? That song? I'm going-" Mickey started to wail and his crackly voice echoed off the clubhouse walls.

"I'm going to turn the radio on." I worked my tail off for the day and took up my usual

spot near the bar for the evening. The day moved on and it wasn't until I got home that I checked my phone. I looked down and it was Peta with a message for me.

Hey. I've thought about some things. When can we see one another?

Walk? Tomorrow with Rogue? Same time, eleven?

Okay.

It was going to go one way or the other with us and tomorrow Rogue and I would find out. As soon as my head hit the pillow I was knocked out and by the time I woke up it was after ten.

I got myself sorted and fed Rogue who was a little more amped up than normal. "You know something is going to happen, don't you? We're going for a w-a-l-k." I knuckle rubbed across the top of his head.

Rogue was smarter than some humans I knew. He howled and started to do his crazy circle dance that he loved to do. Every morning I had to laugh at him and it started my day off on the right foot.

I got his leash worked out and walked out the door. I was going to lay it on the line with Peta. She was going to know how I felt. I drove over to the park, and Peta was already standing there with her hair lighting up the sky. She was the most beautiful and intriguing woman I'd ever seen and when my eyes set on her I knew I didn't want to be with anybody else. I wanted to work out the shit we had going on. She was wearing a gray sweater and she had black jeans on. Both of them looked good on her. Rogue gave us away and started barking as soon as he saw her.

"Hi Peta." I walked over to her and planted a soft kiss on her lips. I wanted to hug her but there was a little standoffish energy that existed between us.

"Hey Rip, good to see you." I ran my fingers over the back of her hand as she looked down at them. Her crystal blue eyes looked back at mine with questions.

"You have anything you want to ask me? It's okay, you can ask," I coaxed her.

"Are you sorry about all the robberies, Rip?" We started our lap as the dewy blades of grass flicked over my biker boots.

"I am." I linked my hand with her baby soft hand as we walked and I let Rogue off the leash to run around the field. "I wish I could take it all back, Peta. It's the same old story. I fell in with the wrong crowd and got into trouble. I don't know what else to say about it. I messed up, but it was a long time ago."

"I get it, and I thought about it some more. It has nothing to do with the robbery of my house. I'm not wanting to blame you for it, and besides, it was a long time ago."

I raised Peta's fingers to my lips and kissed them. "What about you and me?"

Peta glanced coyly at me as she moved her red ringlets out of her face. "What about you and me?"

"Is there a you and me? I want to take it to the next level with you, I want to make it official and see where we can take it."

Peta paused for a moment and it was like being at my first ever live concert. I could feel the adrenaline rising in my chest. "I want to, I guess that's what I wanted to clear up. I had to think for a while. Things at the animal shelter have been so full it's been hard to think, but why not? I like being with you." Rogue rejoined us from his running around

and gave us his circle dance show .

Both of us took our focus away from ourselves to him and laughed. Rogue was the ultimate heart stealer and could make anybody smile. I put him back on the leash as we came back around to my car. "You got any plans today? If you got some time you can come to mine. My scrambled eggs don't go down too bad."

"I could do a second breakfast. I only ate some toast and that's worn off already."

"Let's go to my house then." Peta picked dog hairs off my shirt as I looked down. "That's Rogue shedding the contents of his fur all over me. Not much I can do about that one."

Peta grinned. "You're preaching to someone whose clothes have dog hair on the majority of them. You don't have to tell me about it."

"I thought as much." We both grinned at one another. I wasn't ashamed to say as a man that my heart felt a little lighter. Walking beside Peta and knowing she was my girl made the day a little brighter. We walked to our respective vehicles. I was in the car because I had Rogue and she was on her bike.

I shuffled Rogue inside the car and rode the short distance to my house. Rogue wagged his tail more than normal which was a common thing for him to do with Peta around. I opened up the house as he wagged his tail all the way to the backyard. Peta and I had spent some time sorting out our feelings for one another and being near her again caused a compulsion to kiss her that I couldn't and didn't want to deny.

I turned to face her with our fingers interlaced and looked her in the eye. "I've missed you," I said sweetly to her as I curled a strand of one of her red curls around my index finger. I tucked the stray tendril behind her small cute ear which had a sterling silver earring at the top of her ear lobe.

"I've missed you, too." Her shiny lips were wet from just licking her lips and I couldn't resist taking possession over them. We were locked into our own world together as I weaved my hands around the top curve of her slender hips drawing her closer to my body. We fit together like two peas in a pod. She slipped her hands to the base of my neck and stroked my shoulder length hair as our lips locked together for a long, passionate kiss. My mouth plundered into hers dancing its song with my tongue. We were chest to chest and the beating of our hearts sounded like a drumbeat that wouldn't stop. I wanted her and the more I kissed her, the more eating breakfast was about to be a distant memory. We came up for air for a moment and linked our lips back together again.

"Are we going to make it to breakfast?"

"Can we wait until after breakfast?"

"What are waiting for after breakfast for?" I was asking but I knew the answer, the answer was in my rising cock and its pressure sitting near the bottom of her hip bone.

"I think we can have breakfast afterwards..." was her gentle reply as the process of peeling back our clothes started. I removed her top sweater over her head with the unspoken between us. I took off her top underneath as the rise and fall of her chest mixed in with her soft vanilla scent drove me wild. She repaid the favor by skimming my t-shirt over my head and discarding it onto the ground. I propped her up on the kitchen

bench and took off her jeans leaving her in her bra and panties with the sun landing on her back.

I peeled her out of her panties as I watched the erotic scene play out between us. She unclasped her bra as I focused on the bottom half. She spread her legs on the bench and if she could have been placed in another era she could have rivaled any burlesque star. I placed my hands on both her legs for leverage and dipped my head to behind her knee leading to her hot, slick petal folds. I ran my tongue along the length of her inner thigh until I reached her dewy center and nibbled. She gasped and steadied herself on the counter as my tongue began to explore with gentle licks and then more forceful licks lapping at her entrance and wanting to take her to the next level of pleasure.

She was like a drug and the more she responded the more I wanted to break her open. I got my wish as my tongue slipped over her swollen nub and she released her sweetness and cried out at my discovery.

Under my coffee table were drawers and inside them were condoms . I didn't keep many on me, but they were there for when needed. I grabbed one out of the drawer and came back to my prize. She was still basking in the afterglow of orgasm as I lifted her down from the bench and brought her over to the couch. I sat down on the couch and Peta dropped my underwear down to the floor and my morning wood rose to its full mast. Peta eyed my length hungrily as she unraveled the condom wrapper and slid the condom over it. Her rounded breasts were playing hide and seek between the strands of her red hair.

She sat on my wood as the folds of her pussy covered over my cock and she rocked back and forth. It felt like coming home being inside of her as I thrust my hips forward and gripped my hands on both sides of hers guiding her to more sensation. I grunted with every thrust wanting to make up for the weeks we hadn't been together and the uncertainty between us. Skin to skin, and one thumping pulse beat after the other we were drawing one another to the brink of ecstasy.

As the pressure rose inside of me, my pace increased. I brought her quivering body to the edge again as I slipped in and out of her and found myself letting go into a forceful orgasm. Peta's sensitive responsive body broke open as she cried out with her second orgasm.

My heart was beating so fast that I thought I would need a lasso to wrangle it back into my chest. Thankfully Peta put her hand over my chest and calmed it down. There was a beaded row of sweat lined over the top of her lip and I took my hand and wiped it off.

"That was the entree to breakfast?" Peta smiled and kissed my lips.

"I guess it was."

THE MOODINESS from the past week had shifted. Peta and I were back on track and now we were in Edgewood mingling with the candidate that I told Mustang not to go with.

"Mustang, I don't know if this is your twisted version of a joke because that guy is not the right one to be the treasurer for this club." I couldn't even hide the hiss and the thick cords of veins on the side of my neck were something I could feel.

"I found out a little more about Johnson, he's not that into bikes or nightclubs. He's playing at wanting to join a motorcycle club. I called one of the clubs that he said he was a part of and they said they'd never heard of him. I brought him here to teach him a lesson. He's going to be here in another five to ten. We aren't going to church today. We are going to be in the lower quarters only. I'm going to get the guys to grill him and scare him a little bit. I want to see how he holds up. That will teach him for lying to me."

"Special forces strikes again." I put my closed fist toward his in a fist bump. Mustang had it covered. Pop had obviously been prepped and he looked at ease.

"Rip. When are you taking me to this fishing spot? I've heard so much about it."

"When you're ready, Pop. I got your rod and everything." Pop cackled as his weathered face broke into a smile.

"I might just take you up on that, Rip. I just might. Let's break in this rookie who wants to play at being a fraud."

"I'm ready to do it."

FOURTEEN



## PETA

Sleeping with Rip the second time cemented my feelings for him. I did want to be with him. I wanted to be a part of his life and a part of Rogue's. Deep down it was all the robbery stuff that had me freaked out, I wanted to know more about the Derek guy he spoke about. I wanted to understand more and I couldn't even figure out why. I didn't think I was one for punishment, but his name kept on running around my head. My body produced a strong chemical reaction to him, as well, and that made it even worse.

I knew that Rip was involved with the guy, but he'd paid his time and then some so I wanted to let that go. I called Rip a little while later on the phone when I was on break from the shelter.

"Hi, how's your day going?"

"My day is going good. It's going even better now that you're on the other end of the line."

The sweet little things that he said to me convinced me that he was the right one for me. "You are sweet sometimes." He scoffed when I said the sometimes part. "Well, you aren't sweet all the time."

A long sigh pierced through the phone. "No, I can be grumpy before coffee or a strong whiskey. I haven't had one in a while, but that's a good thing. Sorry, you were talking about me being sweet?"

I giggled at him, he'd made me forget about the serious topic that I wanted to talk to him about. I got back on track and cleared my throat. "Rip, I want to ask you about Derek... I don't know, it's been on my mind and I don't know why." A thick knot piled up in my throat making me put my hand there to untie it. The sandpapery feeling trapped there forced me to go to the kitchen and pour myself a tall glass of water.

I had to put Rip on speaker. "Are you okay?"

"I am. I had to clear my throat. I spluttered a little. Sorry, so weird. Go ahead."

"Ahh. I don't know...what do you want to know? I'm an open book. I don't want to hold secrets from you."

"Tell me about Derek. His name... What was his last name?"

"Rusk. That's his surname." That knot wouldn't let go. I drank some more water. I had to call my parents. I wanted to speak to them about the situation.

"That's all I want to know. I'm going to talk to my parents. I think I have to."

"Umm, okay. I understand. Sometimes we have to let the past die."

Rip saying that despite all the nightmares I'd been having seemed out of character. I let it go and kept talking.

"I don't know about you, but if something is running in my head then it usually means something significant."

"That can be true. I guess you have to do what you have to do. See you later in the week?"

"Yep, you will. Give lots of kisses to Rogue for me."

"Sure will." I hung up the phone and made a note to call my parents right after I went for a ride. I had a rare day off from the shelter, and if I went for a ride I would be able to clear my head. Jogging to the back of my place I pulled the cover off my bike and dusted off some of the sand from the seat. I picked up my helmet from the shelf and grabbed my bike keys from the latch. I opened the garage door and wheeled my bike out. As I backed out of the driveway I cranked the keys of my bike and got on. I swung my leg over the bike and rode out of my suburb and onto the street. Santa Fe's muggy heat kissed my face not providing the relief I wanted. As I leaned my body into the curve and hit the freeway, flashes came in hot waves. The ski mask. Me in the corner of the room. The screams. My mother.

"No! Don't touch me! Get out of here!"

"Shut up lady before I kill you." The blood curdling screams as I ran to her room and my father shielding me from down the hallway. Derek was the robber. He was the one that broke into our house that night. I just had to confirm it. All the replays of the robbery were triggered by Rip. This was why. I kept riding to keep myself balanced, but that didn't work. I turned off the freeway and detoured back home and rode into my driveway. My legs felt like Jello as I got off my bike and walked inside. My face felt as if it was on fire and soaked with sweat all at the same time. I touched my clammy face with my hands as my heart skipped several beats. I jogged to the bathroom to wash my face. I felt as if I was going crazy, but I knew I wasn't. The man that terrorized our house all those summers ago was Derek.

Music from the radio she kept in the kitchen was playing. She always kept the radio on when she was cooking in there. Cooking was her favorite pastime. "Hey Mom, what are you whipping up now?"

"I'm making a pot pie. How's my girl? Are you doing alright? I haven't heard from you in a while. I was beginning to think I lost my daughter and she'd gone missing."

My mother was a fan of being dramatic and I rolled my eyes in a good natured way. "I'm completely fine, Mom. I have been working so hard at the shelter is all. We had some new animals come in and I had to look after them."

"Oooh, what type of animals were they?" My mom got excited, and rightfully so when I talked to her about the animals at the shelter.

"Ahhhhh, we had some kittens, two doggies, a turtle and a few older stray dogs. It's been hectic trying to place them all in foster homes."

"Wow. My daughter is so incredible. All the work you do there is amazing." I heard the click of something and knew my mother so well I could just about tell she'd put

something in the oven.

"Mom, I have to ask you something... I want to ask you about that night. The robbery..."

She went quiet at the other end of the line for a good thirty seconds. "What is it that you wanted to ask me about?" she asked quietly. I didn't have to say much else; she knew the night I was referring to.

"I wanted to know the guy's name. The one who broke in. Was it Derek?" A pan clanged on the ground and my heart moved to my throat. "How did you know that? Why do you remember his name?" My mother was startled and I understood that knot in my stomach now. I understood that she knew him and that my gut was telling me the right things.

"The guy's name was Derek. Derek Rusk. I couldn't forget that name if I tried. He got away with it. Why are you asking me that? Are you in trouble?"

Hard to lie to my mother. Always had been. Even when I tried to steal a candy bar in the store I wasn't able to get away with it as my mother turned right around in the aisle and put her palm out with a wry look of disdain asking for me to cough up the candy bar. I stood with all my teeth bared in a mischievous smile with the candy bar behind my back and looking up at her with my bowl haircut. She didn't buy it. She kept standing in the aisle waiting patiently for me to give the candy bar to her. I was no shoplifter, I just had those little grabby hands that reached for things on the shelves. I didn't know what age I was but I was pretty young.

I made a straight face through the phone as if that would help. "No."

"You're lying. Why did you ask?" My mother gave me a straight, blunt reply back.

I fulfilled part of her answer. "Dreams. I've been having bad dreams and they were of the robbery."

"Still doesn't tell me how you knew his name. How did you know his name?"

"I don't know, strange coincidence," I lied some more and if I didn't get off the phone quick I didn't know how long I could keep it up.

"Sorry about those dreams, honey. It was a long time ago and we have so many security protocols here that we have made sure that won't happen again. Believe me."

"I know. I'm reminded every time I have to press all the buttons on the gates to be let in," I said.

"Don't complain about that. We have never had a break-in since then."

"Do you have any paperwork about the case? Did he go to jail?"

My mother coughed and sputtered a little. "Sorry, whoosh of heat coming from the oven."

Sadly, he didn't go to jail. His accomplice who had the getaway car waiting for him was the one that got charged. I'm glad that someone got charged. We did the facial recognition thing at the police station, but it wasn't enough. The police fed us the story that he went into hiding or something like that. We think they were lazy and didn't want to see the case through properly.

"Whoa. I didn't know all this. Wait- why don't I know this?"

"You were too young and by the time the robbery, the court cases and the stress of it

all that night took us through we didn't want to retell the story anymore. I just hope that the other guy was caught because to have the gall to walk inside someone else's house thinking they weren't home is what's really insane. That's a level of crazy that I don't want repeated. His eyes looking back at me..." My mother's voice trailed off as if she was drifting back into the memory itself.

"It's over, Mom. It won't happen again. I'm sorry."

"Me, too, darling. Listen, I have to get back to my baking so you have yourself a lovely day okay?" From the shakiness of her tone I could tell she didn't want to talk about it anymore.

"I will, thanks, Mom for answering all my questions. I know it was a bit painful." I didn't want her upset for the afternoon, but I had to know.

"You're welcome, and no problem."

The build up of dread that I didn't want to face if Derek was chasing Rip, and they used to run together that made him involved with someone that was way too close for comfort. That sick feeling that ran through my stomach came back with a vengeance. Now I would have to face him.

FIFTEEN

RIP

She found out, and now I had no other option but to tell her about that dark night. Me and Derek were connected in deep shit at the time. I was the one driving the vehicle, and if she dug a little deeper she would know there was only a few degrees of separation between us all in life. I fixed a coffee and sat out on my porch with the knowing that it would be the end between me and Peta. It would have to be because how could she be with me after knowing what I did?

What would she do? She couldn't stay with me. Peta was a smart, bright young woman and it wouldn't be too hard to piece together the fact that we were aligned. I'd already confessed that part to her. I had the day off and I needed to clear the fog. I was ashamed to say that I lit up a cigarette to calm the jitters in my fingers.

"This is bad, Rogue. This is bad. Tell me what I'm going to do?" Rogue had no clue what I was talking about, but he knew something was up because he put his paws on top of my feet and stuck his butt out in the air. I patted his bowed head and poured some snacks. He scarfed them down his hatch and woofed at me for some more. I poured him a little more kibble and prepared my fishing rods. I didn't have to be down at the clubhouse until later in the afternoon to work the bar. I couldn't even muster a laugh for the way we ran Johnson out of the warehouse. I was too preoccupied by the past rearing up to bite me.

On the ride over to the river my mind tried to focus on what was the best thing to do, and all I could think was to tell her the truth. Trying to fish was a horrendous idea and it didn't work. There was a nasty pack of clouds that were looming right over our heads between the cracks in the canyon and it didn't look like a good option anyway.

Rogue did a lot of barking, he was about as confused as I was. I let him off the leash because I trusted him. He was only going to roam around, sniff a few things and come right back over to me anyway. I sucked in the fresh air in one mouthful and smoked my cigarette in the other. Guilt was eating away at me like maggots in a rotting corpse, and for all my efforts to get rid of Derek from my life only for him to show up in my life in a different way entirely.

Thirty-five minutes later my patience with myself wore down and I packed up my fishing gear right as a drop of rain hit. I held out my palm hoping that if I received the rain from the heavens it would wash away my sins. I might have been wrong for doing

that, but as I stood there the rain got heavier and I lifted my head to the sky as it covered my face washing away the ashy taste in my mouth from the cigarette smoke.

"Rogue, it's all messed up. We ain't getting out of this one, buddy. You might have to kiss your friendship with Peta goodbye, boy." Peta was the spark between us. Rogue howled when I said her name and turned in a funny circle like he always did as the rain fell. My hair was plastered to my face as I hung my head in shame and stared out at the empty river. Nobody else was there. It was just me and Rogue enjoying the cleansing bath.

I trudged back to the car with Rogue and put a towel down so I wouldn't soak through the seat. Driving in numbness I knew I would have one chance to get an apology right with Peta. It was going to be a hard sell, but I was willing to try.

Cranking the heater up Rogue shook himself out in the backseat as the droplets hit my face. "Rogue! That's what I get for taking you out with me in the rain."

Rogue woofed again and I reached around to pat his underbelly, and prepared myself for the doom of decline between me and Peta.

BREAKER WAS LAUGHING and talking to Mickey at the bar and counting stock. Both of them acted like they didn't have a care in the world and I felt envious of them.

Breaker tilted his chin up in acknowledgement as he walked in the door. "Whassup, Rip. You look like rat shit, buddy. What's going on with you?"

"Yep, you're looking a little secondhand there." Mickey joined in with the criticism.

"Thanks for the vote of encouragement, brothers. I'm really going through it right now. I have some serious situations going on and I have to make a decision."

"This is about that Peta girl isn't it? The one from the Santa Fe Rumblers?"

Breaker nodded at Mickey. "Ah, the dog walking chicks, they were pretty cool. I liked their bikes, too."

"That's her, but that still doesn't help me with my problem."

"What's the big deal? You're dating her yeah? I think I rode past you guys at the dog park. Was that you?"

"Yeah, probably, but look, man, that doesn't help me right now. I got this problem. It's a big deal." I combed my fingers through my hair and blew out hard.

"Cough it up then. What's the problem you got?" Breaker asked.

"A long time ago - the prison stint..." My hand got another workout through my hair as I tried to tell them the mess I was in. "I was in a messed up robbery a long time ago. Peta's been having these nightmares about a robbery and it was years ago. I messed up and rolled with Derek one night and we thought the owners weren't going to be home. They came back a day early and shit got messy. That was Peta's house."

"The fuck? You robbed your girlfriend's house? What kind of -" Mickey put his hands up on his head in shock at my chilling admission.

"I know. I told you it wasn't a happy story. I'm in it now. Her parents told her the man

involved in the robbery and the fact he was let off. She doesn't know I was the one in the getaway car and that it was me."

"Play it straight. Tell her. If she can forgive you and move forward then she will," Breaker said.

"I'm with Breaker on that one. I mean, how can you lie now anyway? She's going to know or figure it out anyway isn't she? If you ran with Derek back then won't she just assume you were robbing places with him?" Mickey asked, playing detective, and the both of them talking was making me feel overwhelmed.

"Yeah, she probably will think that," I countered.

"Then tell her the truth. She'll come to respect you in the end for it. Hang in there. She knows about your past; she didn't walk away then, have faith that she'll stick it out with you. If not, well, there's plenty of fish in that river you can go catch," Breaker said as he clapped a heavy hand over my back.

Mickey turned on the music behind the bar and Breaker lifted his thickly muscled arms off the bar and got ready to greet the patrons at the door.

"Mickey, can you give me a whiskey on the rocks, my man? I gotta calm down." Even to me it was amazing what I was feeling inside for Peta. I didn't know that my feelings ran so deep until that moment.

Mickey looked at me with pity but drifted a drink down the bar and I swiftly made good use of the liquid as it went down smooth. "I fucked it up," I murmured, feeling sorry for myself.

"Easy, it's not that bad. She knows most of the story. Come on, we got work to do."

The burn running down my throat eased the worry and the night began like it always did with patrons flowing in the door. I checked my phone again and there was no text message. I was dying to know what her parents told her.

Everyone that came through the door looked like a blur to me. They were just people flowing in and out. I even remembered talking to a few of them but I still kept thinking about my past and the repercussions. I would have to fess up and tell Peta if we were going to make it. No matter if she didn't call me tomorrow, I would still call her.

I helped a few drunk patrons out the door and got them into a taxi. That had been my role for the last few weeks at the bar, taking up people by the elbows who didn't know how to hold their liquor. I mentioned it to Mickey and they were supposed to be monitoring it a little more, but the bar was getting busier and busier, and even with one other person it was looking like the Guardians would need more staff.

As the night wore on and the last stragglers cleared out of the bar I spoke to Mustang.

"We need more staff. Mickey is getting slammed at the bar and we're getting too many drunk asses in here. I'm having to babysit. I can't cover both sides anymore."

"You're right, we're going to need a team. This is becoming a nightmare to recruit. The Guardians are about to step into new territory. Nothing I can't handle. We might need to call in some of the security personnel that Edgewood has on the books. I gotta talk to Scout... amongst other things, I think soon there is going to be a change of hands."

"Change of hands, what you mean?"



"I mean that Pop is getting on and he's sharp still, but I was talking to Red the other day and he's starting to tell him more about the club and passing knowledge, he thinks soon it will be his time." Mustang looked pretty neutral about the idea so I probed further.

"What do you think about that?"

"I think it's a good, natural progression. Red is solid and I trust him to take over the helm. Pop has made it apparent in meetings anyway, so it's flowing naturally. It's not like the Edgewood guys would be surprised with the changeover."

"No, I guess they wouldn't. Good point. What do you think about this Crunch guy? You going to try again or look at someone else?"

"He's an interesting guy. I don't know, I may have to sit with it a little longer. He might be the right one though. Let's see."

"I know you'll make the right call."

"You look like you're a million miles away tonight."

"Yeah. Thinking about Derek and that whole thing. I will work it out."

Mustang skipped the pep talk that the others tried to give me. He just nodded his head at me and left it at that.

My phone beeped and my heart almost stopped. I looked down at my cell phone. Peta was on the line.

"Hey Rip... I think we need to talk." The words no man wanted to hear. Peta was relaying them now on the other end of the line.

No turning back now. I would have to come clean.

SIXTEEN

## PETA

Come around to my house tomorrow for lunch?

Ok. What time?

Midday?

Ok. Bye Rip.

Rip was either going to lie to my face or he was going to tell me the truth. The truth was what I wanted to hear from him, and I knew that it wasn't going to be good because my stomach was back to churning like clothes in a washing machine. I moved around the house and cleaned up things that didn't need cleaning. I wiped down my bike a thousand times to stop my mind from running, but there was no escaping the truth I was about to find out from him.

I stood over the bathroom sink as I let the cold water hit my skin making it tingle causing me to inwardly gasp as my wet lashes processed the excess water and it ran down my face. I patted my face dry with the hand towel and left out of the bathroom slipping my motorcycle keys in my pocket. My bike was calling me and it was time.

As I rode I thought about Rip's smiling face. The way he looked into my eyes as we held each other with the sound of the river rushing in the background. Tears welled in my eyes thinking about Rogue and him together. A man and his trusty dog. One I probably wouldn't see again depending on what he had to say. My heart was already sinking like an anchor under the water as my bike reached the front of Rip's house and I killed the engine.

Slowly I got off my bike, blew out a tired breath and looked at the front of Rip's house. I stood there as the wind passed over my face with my helmet in hand. Each step was a step toward the truth. I had enough courage to find out the truth of that night.

I knocked on the door twice and Rip opened the door with Rogue's paw scraping the wooden door. As soon as Rip's unshaven and bloodshot eyes opened the door I knew what he didn't want me to know. Rogue wagged his tail side to side as if nothing was happening. I bobbed down and greeted him first because, after all, he had nothing to do with what was going on.

"Hey Rogue, hey boy. You look good. So good. I missed you." Rogue was wriggling around so much that I couldn't get a handle on him. He was so excited and happy to see me that he loaded me up with sloppy dog kisses and caught me on my bottom lip.

"Rogue! Pfft, your dog kisses. Lucky your breath doesn't stink."

"Hi Peta. Thanks for coming by. You doing alright?"

"Yeah, I'm doing fine, how about you?" This was awkward already and I didn't like it, but it was necessary.

"I've been better, come on in." I walked inside and the air was clogged with unspoken truths and I was already angry because he was upset about a fucked up situation that he created.

I said nothing as I walked into his space. I stayed silent as my stomach churned away. My hands shifted to my back pockets and I was grateful that he didn't try to kiss me. Rip rubbed the back of his neck a few times. I wasn't going to speak first, I would let him do that.

"Do you want a glass of water?"

"Yes. A glass of water would be good." I watched as the water ran and Rip handed me a glass with water in it. I sunk down half the glass then looked into it as Rip and I danced around one another. Rage was running through me along with disappointment.

"I got some things to tell you, Peta." Rip kept rubbing his neck and it was starting to be annoying.

"Okay, and what do you have to tell me?" Looking him squarely in the eye I listened.

"That night of the robbery of your parent's house, I was there, I was with Derek then. I was his partner in crime I guess you could say. I'm sorry. I didn't even know you then. I made a huge mistake that night."

In my head I saw myself pummeling him with my fists as he looked so guilty. "But you did know, Rip. I asked you about your past and you told me you knew him, but you missed the part where you were with him. You knew!" I flew at him with fury. "You helped terrorize my family. It took them years to recover from that including me. It was you! That's why I was having the dreams. How could you do that, Rip?"

I was so angry that I pushed his shoulder hoping to knock it clean off his shoulders. It didn't work, and he stood standing as he tried to grab at my elbows, that didn't work, either. I wriggled free from him as a pained look covered his face.

"Don't be angry with me. It was so long ago and I know that sounds like an excuse. Give me a chance."

"No. I will never forgive you for this, and you better watch out. You seduced me and you lied to me, Rip. I will never let you near me again."

"You're wrong. I dreaded this happening, don't run away, Peta." My mind was already made up and I was running to the door. I slammed the front door as hard as I could as Rogue wailed on my way out. It was hard to see through the tears as I got on my bike. I pulled my helmet down as quickly as I could and cranked the engine up. As I cranked the engine and moved off the curb I propelled my bike forward for home with a determination in my heart that made every single one of the Guardians my enemy. Rip had broken my heart when I gave it to him. All I could see was the wrong he did, not any reason to forgive him.

As I arrived home I let the tears flow as I recalled my mother telling me who the second person was.

"Honey, you were asking me who the other person was... I wanted to forget the memory, but I don't want to hide the truth from you. It's over now. His name was Aaron Mathers. He has some other name that he goes by but I don't know what that is. I stopped caring about it long ago because I wanted to erase it from my memory."

Aaron Mathers was Rip's real name. I knew because I saw his license when he picked up Rogue. A funny world we live in where the person who I was dating was the same man who helped a burglar rob our family home.

I called Michaela as soon as I got home. "Michaela, can we get the girls together for an emergency meeting. I have a situation and I need some help on it. It's major. I'm going to need every single one of you on my side."

"Say no more. What time do you need us at the clubhouse? Are you okay?"

"If you can come down to the clubhouse tonight by six that will work, and no I'm not okay. I'm on a warpath, and I'm going to need every single one of my girls to fight."

"This sounds major, I want the full scoop and don't leave anything out when you get here. I will get everyone there."

Hours later I rode down to our clubhouse with vengeance on my mind, I couldn't see reason and deep inside I recognized that there was probably more to the story that I didn't know. That part of the story I didn't want to know. I wanted to wallow in my own painful one that I'd created. It was much better for me. By the time I got to the clubhouse everyone else was already there.

Michaela, Gerry, Willow, Lisa and Robin all looking at the steam coming off my head.

"Okay girl, you look pissed. What's going on?" Willow asked.

"I found out about the dreams and the reason they were such a problem for me," I told them as I sighed out loud.

"You're scaring me now, Peta. Spill," Lisa said.

"Rip ran with a guy named Derek and a long time ago he used to rob people. He told me he went to jail for a crime he didn't commit, but he lied to me. He did. He was with Derek the night my family's house got burglarized. He was the one in the getaway car. He was there and he didn't tell me." As I told them the full extent of the damage all I felt was coldness inside.

"Whaaaaattttt. You mean to tell me you've been dating this same guy? Did you find out everything?" Willow was asking and I didn't need to know more than what I already knew. As far as I was concerned, if I never saw Rip's face again it would be too soon.

"Willow, I don't care. He was there helping rob my parent's place."

"You're right. He was. My bad." She was quiet as I glowered at her. I was ready to come for anyone that didn't believe what I had to say in regards to Rip.

Lisa had the audacity to question me, however. "I know it's hard, but he didn't know it was your house back then. He's done his time don't you think? I know it's a super weird coincidence though."

"It's more than that. He had an opportunity to tell me," I snapped.

"But he did. He told you he went to jail. He might not have remembered your house," Lisa said without thinking.

I looked at her in horror. "How come you're not backing me up? Why don't you

understand that he did remember because he confessed to me today! Don't you get that?" I started yelling at Lisa and she put her hands up.

"Hey, I'm trying to help. Stop yelling, somebody has to stay objective here," Lisa said.

"It won't be me being objective, you don't know what it was like that night," I fought back.

Lisa stopped playing devil's advocate because she saw that I was hurting. She opened up her arms as the tears stung my eyes. "Come in here." I sunk into her arms and wept at the betrayal.

"We got your back." The girls hugged Lisa and all rallied around me so it became a massive group hug. At the end of the day the girls had my back and that's what mattered the most.

"So the question is how do you want to handle it?" Michaela asked. "It's a tricky situation. We've done charity rides with them and Mustang asked me to sign up the Rumlbers for another one in the future. We can't go up against the Guardians, that's not what we do. We can't take on special forces. We just can't. So if that's one of your plans, Peta, I can't let you do it. We have your back, but we can't be stupid here." Michaela looked at me closely and how angry I was.

"I want to do something bad to him and the club, but the rest of the guys didn't do anything and they have the women behind them, as well. I know it's a bad idea. I'm just hurt. I really am. I can't believe this is happening."

"I know, but it's a little crazy to go in there and do something to them. Sleep on it. Don't make an emotional decision right now. You're not in the right frame of mind. Can we do a girlie night with lots of wine and burn anything that Rip left at your house? Now that is something I can help you do," Michaela grinned as she hugged my stiff shoulders.

"I can't believe it. I don't know. It's too much to know I was sleeping with him and he broke into my house," I said slowly as Lisa put her hand over mine.

"I'll think about it. I feel dirty. I feel so, so dirty, and my parents will never approve of him. They never will. The whole thing is the biggest mess ever and I thought Tinder was a mess. That's nothing compared to this.

"Don't feel bad, he didn't know and you didn't. It's one of the most bizarre things I've ever heard of though. It's nuts."

"You're telling me. I'm not even sure how to handle it, the whole thing makes me feel sick to my stomach."

"You're going to be fine. Don't let it get you down. You have us girls and I would even be happy to go throw eggs at his motorcycle or his car. I don't care which," Gerry said.

"Eggs and flour? That combination might just work. I know where he lives."

"Exactly." Michaela high fived me and we stayed and I downed a beer to ease my frazzled nerves before I left for home.

SEVENTEEN

RIP

It was all a horse shit heap of misunderstanding, and I wish she knew that. I would never do anything to harm her or her family. That wasn't the type of man I was. I'd gone back to my fishing spot so I could get my head straightened out. It turned out to be the best place for me to be. The cobalt blue stream pushing over the tawny rocks brought me inner peace as I threw the rod out on the river. It was the most peace I'd had in a few days with Rogue beside me keeping me company.

"Rogue buddy. I keep on screwing up my life. I wonder when I'm going to get it right." My philosophical bent wasn't helping me get my girl back. I was surprised I didn't reach to pick up a cigarette, but I didn't. I picked up the rod instead. This time I got the live bait and I watched as the fish latched on, and I caught three fish in the first hour.

Rogue was on all fours on the picnic blanket I found at Walmart for him. At least he was content and watching the water. "Atta boy. It's back to you and me kid, because me and P-E-T-A are not doing so good." Rogue's ears perked up even though I'd sounded the letters out. "Oh, you understand anyway. You're too smart of a dog for me."

Rogue groaned as he continued to watch the easy flow of water downstream. I tried to call her, but she didn't answer. I looked at the phone and then put it down. I picked it up again not knowing what I could say to her to make her understand. I had half my mind on letting it go completely. The other half of my mind was on trying to chase her down and making her see, but what good would it do if she couldn't see for herself?

This was day three of us not talking and that would have been alright if it was because we were both busy. My line jerked as another fish fell for the bait, hook, line and sinker as I pulled it out of the water.

The fish flopped and jumped around for a moment longer as I waited for it to settle. Rogue's curious eyes fixated on the fish's plight as he groaned in his throat and put his paw over the fish and barked. I laughed as I watched Rogue put the fish in its place. He kept barking until the fish stopped moving and he moved his paw off it.

By the time I caught the seventh fish it was time to leave. The river was in oversupply, but my heart was empty. I wished that Peta was with me for the fishing expedition. I was pretty sure that she would have caught something. The whole car smelled like fish and my house would, too, because I would need to gut the fish and prepare it. I planned on giving the fish to the neighbors and take some into work for the



crew. I'm sure they would appreciate it.

I picked up my phone as I tried one more time to call Peta. At least she wasn't blocking my calls. Maybe it would just take some time like it did the first time for us to work through things. She was a sweet girl, and even though she was angry with me I didn't think she was the vengeful type. I dragged my ass to the bar to get ready for work. Day time work was phasing out at the club and being replaced more and more by the night club shifts. As I walked through the door Breaker scoffed.

"That bad huh?"

"The worst. Peta is not talking to me."

"Give it time. You're a good guy, she's going to see it."

"Maybe, I might have to let it go altogether." My right pants pocket started to vibrate and I lifted my phone out of my pocket.

It's not over. Peta.

My frown caused me to experience a temporary headache. "Huh?" I showed the phone to Breaker as he read the blue screen. My phone beeped again.

I'm coming for you.

"What?" I slid the phone back in my pocket because I didn't even understand what that meant.

Breaker was munching on a Snickers candy bar and turned to look at me. "Did you get another text?"

"Yeah, weird. She said she's coming for me, and I sure as hell don't know if that's a good thing or not."

Breaker broke off a healthy chunk of his Snickers bar. "I can assure you that's not a good thing. She means exactly what she said. Let me make it easy for you. You broke into her family home all those years ago and now she's coming."

"Fuck outta here. She wouldn't do that. Not Peta. She's too sweet a person and what are the Rumlbers going to do? That's not going down." I laughed at Breaker and his eyebrows raised the highest I'd ever seen them raised.

"Then you don't know women. I would make sure you put your bike and your car undercover. That would be the best idea."

I looked a little dumbfounded, like that fish I pulled out of the water. "I don't even know what you're talking about. Crazy talk. She wouldn't. I know she wouldn't."

"Oh yeah, she would. Boy, I've had my fair share of crazy women. I would put your bike in the garage. She might not do anything to you here, but that text message is a woman scorned." Breaker settled his eyes on me. "Hey, it might work out for you. It worked out for Axle and Bell when she fly kicked him in the guts and tried to kill him. You never know."

To me there was nothing funny about the double whammy coming for me. I'd already served my time, I didn't need to re-serve it through Peta. Gunner came to the front of the bar. He'd been off for a few days and I hadn't seen him.

"Hey Gunner. How are you man? Long time no see. You look good."

"I'm good. Taking care of my lady Claire and Angel. It's been a busy time at home."

"That's great. You're a real family now. I forgot that you were a sniper for a minute."

Me joking with Gunner was a way for me to get my mind off the text message that Peta sent me.

"Trust me, my trigger finger is still ready for whoever needs it. I went shooting at the range. I never miss a week without going there."

"I believe you. I'm glad you haven't had to use it."

"What about you?" The music kicked in and Gunner had to talk a little louder.

"It's not good. I got my woman threatening me. Not that she's mine in the first place. I made some mistakes in the past and now they're coming back to bite me."

"Ah, the past. The door we try to close, but it always keeps on opening."

"Yep, that bastard. I'm tired of talkin' about it so we can move on."

"Fair enough, but if you ever want anyone to talk to, let me know. I know this relationship stuff can be tough to navigate."

"You're telling me. I don't know what the hell I'm doing. I'm better off sticking to my fishing."

"No, you're not. Peta is good for you. I saw how you came in with that big grin on your face and doing a hot shoe shuffle when you got together. Ride it out. It's worth it. It's what I did with Claire, and now we got Angel."

"In case you don't know my life, it doesn't quite work out that way. I have too many obstacles in the way."

"All part of the fun."

Fun was not Peta plotting revenge on me. That's what I knew for sure. I let her message roll off my back and enjoyed the rest of my shift.

A FEW DAYS later at the Santa Fe clubhouse...

A billowing plume of gray and black smoke was wrapped around Stunt's Ducati. His bike sat in the middle of it as he brought it up on two wheels and spun on it. Breaker, Gunner and Mustang watched in awe as Stunt showed off with handle on the bike. He was a master of stunts and it was insane to watch. It was like watching a man wrangle a horse. I could watch him all day. Mickey whistled through his teeth.

Stunt eased the bike down and it rebounded a little as he set it in its place. I clapped my hands as I cleared the smoke away. "That shit was hot, you just learned that?" I asked him in awe.

"Yeah, I did, but not just learned, I've been working on it for the last year. I finally got it down the other day and now I know where I was going wrong."

"You killed that. I'm impressed." I shook his gloved hands. Stunt was more on the dramatic side, he had a flair for it. The yellow gloves with the holes in them were pretty stylish. They worked with his sporty Ducati. He was the man.

Stunt was a little out of breath from the stunt so I gave him some breathing room as we walked in step to the inside. He looked me up and down as his brow knitted together.

"You're still standing upright. That's a good sign."

"What do you mean?"

"You didn't hear yet?" Stunt's voice went up a notch.

"Hear what?" I spat on the ground next to me.

"Ah, I was at the Violet Bar having a drink after shooting and there was talk about you. The girl you're dating from the Rumlbers. I don't know how serious it is, you know how men get when they have a drink in them. There was talk that she was teaming up with the Devils. To me that sounds nuts, but I don't know. Does she have that in her to do something like that?" Stunt asked.

It was time for me to pay a visit to the shelter because this was not a rumor I wanted to mess around with. "Man, I don't know her that well. We were getting there in our relationship until shit hit the fan. I'm gonna go see her at the animal shelter and see what the deal is."

"That would be your best bet, because from the sounds of the Violet Bar whispers - and there were plenty of them. She might be capable of doing this."

Mickey was at the bar counting up the stock and talking to Mustang. "We've got a solid revenue for the last quarter, we are up by ten percent. If we can get three more staff members we can cover when the bands start running. I was talking to the bar manager down there about how much he pulls when Tabitha comes through and it's close to three thousand for the night. If not more, depending on if it's a special show running during the holidays."

"Mickey... you always been this good with numbers?" Mustang looked at him in a new light and I could see what he was getting at.

"I don't know. I like 'em and I knew where to put them to make money. Yeah, I guess I have been ever since I got clean."

"I want to hire this guy Jason Perez to come in and run the numbers for the expansion on the bar. I want you to keep an eye on him- just make sure his numbers are adding up. You can be the number two spot to him. Edgewood has a treasurer and a secretary, I don't see why you can't fill the secretary spot, and I can have you work together."

Mickey looked at Mustang as if he'd just won a grand prize. "Yeah?" he snorted as he ran a hand through his hair.

Mustang gave him the look of a proud father. "Yes. I want you to run that spot. You manage the day to day operations and taking from the bar, nothing will change there. It will just be an expanded position where you will work hand in hand with the new treasurer. Give him a feel of the landscape and the bigger plan of what we're trying to do here."

"This is so cool. I'm amped up to do this. I won't let you down, Mustang."

"I know you won't. I trust you, Mickey. You've come a long way."

"Thanks, you gave me a new lease on my life. I'm grateful man," Mickey replied. He fist bumped with Mustang. I had some questions of my own.

"When do we get to meet this guy?" I asked out of curiosity. The last time I saw him was when he came in with the other clown Johnson.

"He's going to be coming through in the next day or so. He might come in here tonight. He's finishing up with the nightclub he turned around from near bankruptcy in

Santa Fe. The Ruffled Feather. You know that joint?"

"The Ruffled Feather? That place is a complete dive fest. We can't be talking about the same place. What did he do there?"

"He transformed it from the ground up and they are now worth half a million dollars. Now we are nowhere near the slum pile they are in. We are doing pretty well as it were so imagine if we can get his expertise, then we can take it one step further." Mustang had come along way, too. He was morphing into the role of the club president and an enterprising one pretty damn well.

"Yeesh, this guy sounds like the right one for the club. I can't wait to start working with him. Pretty scary, though, for us overall as a club, especially if things really start blowing up. I wonder what the club is going to turn into? Is the chop shop still rocking? I haven't heard Hawk talk about it much."

"They still run quietly, that's where we get our parts from, but some of the crew have been let go because there's no demand, and our real estate property investments are holding steady. We don't have to do that anymore." Mustang's eyes diverted to the front of the warehouse as Breaker prepared to open up the doors. The night was about to turn up a notch. Ladies in their skin tight dresses and their pumps were already at the door. Behind them walking in the darkness was the guy we'd just been speaking about.

"What's his name again?" I asked Mustang as I checked out his swagger into the bar. His eyes roamed down the ladies' legs and up again as they fawned over him. A smirk floated over his face.

So he's a ladies' man. Not hard to miss, and he was handsome enough to be one.

"Crunch for short."

"What's Crunch about?" Mickey asked as he made the bar shine with a wipe down of his cloth.

"He's a number cruncher, that's what it means." Mustang stayed in his spot as Crunch floated effortlessly over to us.

"Hey fellas, how are you doing? You got some nice work coming through the door. Looks like the night is starting right." Crunch had a fresh cockiness to him that reminded me a little bit of Stunt, but with a milder affliction of it.

"We have some nice ladies coming through here, that's true. Hey, I don't know if you remember or not, I'm -" I started to say as his rich brown eyes twinkled back at me. He seemed like a high energy guy, and maybe the club could use an injection of that if we were going into the nightclub business.

"The road captain right?" He beat me to the chase and stuck out his hand for me to shake.

"Right." Good memory, that was another win on the board for the Guardians. The way Crunch was talking led me to believe that we just might get along well.

"Nice to be here. Let's turn this place into a thriving business." Crunch looked around the space and Mustang's eyes followed along. "It's got a lot of potential that's for sure."

EIGHTEEN

## PETA

The day my mind changed and went haywire was the day Rip told me he invaded my house all those years ago. All I could see was a black cloud of rage. A seething inside that made me want to annihilate him and the Guardians. I heard what the girls said. I heard Michaela say taking on a major club like them would be in the too hard basket, but I had my own brand of revenge that I wanted to enact. The sweet part of Peta had left the building and gone on a break. All because I remembered. My mother's hair fell out because she was so scared to be in the house alone.

I remembered the security company coming and replacing all the locks and cameras in the house. I remembered the talks of moving because it wasn't safe to stay in the space.

All of it came flashing into my mind like a huge tidal wave threatening to take me over completely. That was the fuel to motivate me to go and find out about the Devils. I knew from Rip that they were the Guardians biggest rivals and I wanted to make sure they suffered. I called Gerry who had an ear for gossip and things going on in the underground of Santa Fe.

I found myself at the dog park walking around it trying not to lose my mind and to blow off all of the rage inside of me. I eventually settled and sat on the park bench and called Gerry. The wind of warfare blew over my face because it was time to show Rip who was boss. "Hey Gerry."

"Hey girl. I've been worried about you the last couple of days, are you okay? I thought you were going to burst a blood vessel the other day."

"I know. I felt like I was. But I can't let this rest. I can't. I have to do something. I need your help to find some people." Clear and ambitious in my revengeful plans I waited for her to listen to my appeal.

"What are you going to do, Peta? And if you are going to do something, you're not going to do it without me. Sorry. Or the girls... we ride or die until the bitter end. I know what Michaela said, but she's going to back you, but you just have to have a solid plan."

"I figure she will. I need the name of the Devils of Destruction president. Do you know how I can get to him or get a message to him?"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa sister. You are out of your league on that one. Why do you want to see that guy? He is not on your side, that's for sure." Gerry backed down from the statement she just made as the wind changed and blew my red locks over my face.

"You just said you were with me and now you're backing down? So which is it, Gerry?" I asked with bitterness laced in my tone.

"It's none of that. I just know those guys are ruthless and they don't care about anyone but themselves. How do you not know that?"

I didn't want to hear her. "Just tell me where they are and I can go see about them."

"I don't think I can let you go alone," Gerry breathed heavily into the phone. "We are all going together. You're not going in there without us."

"You don't have to be involved with this step. I want to teach Rip a lesson."

"Do you need to do it this way? You're going to impact the whole club of the Guardians, you're not thinking straight. Why don't you wait until you calm down a little bit?" The more reasonable that Gerry tried to be the more I wanted to go after the Guardians. It was as if another person had emerged inside of me and was about to step forth.

"Nope. Tell me where he hangs out. Now, Gerry, or I will get the information from someone else, I swear I will."

"Alright, Jesus. I'm coming with you. He hangs out at a dive bar right near the edge of Edgewood. Some little suburb, I think it's Sedillo or something like that."

"Okay, if you are coming with me, be at my house by seven o' clock tonight. We're riding over to the bar. I want to talk to him."

"Man, this is dangerous, reckless and all kinds of wrong and I think that's why I kinda like it. We don't have any weapons though. I don't know if it's the best idea."

"I have pepper spray," I said mildly knowing that pepper spray wouldn't do a thing.

"That won't do shit, Peta. My father has a shotgun, but I can't carry that on my bike. This is a death mission," she sighed hard. "Butttt, being that you're my favorite person I'm going to ride with you. We just need to flirt a little and make sure we get in and out."

"Good. I could use an ally. Don't tell Michaela yet until we get back and find out what they would be willing to do for us," I plotted.

"Alright, hellcat. See you at seven. We are a biker crew, and now we're dabbling on the dark side."

"Correction. I'm dabbling on the dark side and you're along for the ride."

"Ugh. I'm worried about this. Okay, let me get off the phone before I puke and change my mind. See you tonight, Rumbler."

NIGHTFALL PEAKED at just after six, daylight was over and now it was time to ride and meet the president of the Devils of Destruction. My plan was to team up with them and move against the Guardians - or at least give them a scare enough that they knew about us. I was starting to feel differently and my mind was changing slowly, but it was too late now. Backing down now would be a cowardly act. I waited outside of my place as the world settled in for the evening and the amber glow from other people's houses shone out into the street.

Gerry rolled up ten minutes later on her bike and beeped. My helmet was off and the cool air hitting my skin let me know I was alive inside and add in the thumping dose of adrenaline coursing through my body and that was enough to have me ready and on the bike to go to Sedillo.

"Hey Gerry, you lead the way. You know where the bar is, I don't."

"Okay. You sure you wanna do this?" Gerry's eyebrows gathered as she stared at me with her pupils shining back at me in the night.

"Yes. I'm committed. Lead the way." My helmet came down on my head before she could question me anymore and we rode off into the night. She zipped in front of me as a puff of smoke flew out of her exhaust. As we rode I took in the scenery, I'd never been to Sedillo in my life and had no idea the place existed. As we exited the freeway and onto the deep, dark gravelly back roads to destination unknown I felt my stomach curl up. Suddenly I wasn't feeling so hopeful about going to this impromptu meeting. In a way I was hoping that the president wasn't there and I wouldn't have to go through with my plan of revenge.

Too late now, the bar was right in front of us and the welcome was a biker with a bottle in his hand staggering out of it still swigging and stumbling. "Ah, ya cocksuckers. I'm going home. I don't like your stinking bar anyway."

The night held an eerie darkness and we were idle on our bikes side by side. The man had jet black hair and the light from the bar, which looked more like a tavern, was shining on him. When he caught sight of us he waved and crossed over his feet and kept walking. The whole time my heart had ascended from my body and was somewhere outside of it. I came back into it and felt as if I wanted to pee my pants.

I wasn't talking so tough now. This was no game. Gerry looked at me as her eyes warily scanned the man to see if he was going to circle back around to us. He didn't. I deliberately parked our bikes in the light and closer to the bar so we could exit quickly if we needed to. As soon as we got to the steps of the bar I could feel that we were in for a wild night. Rowdy noise was coming out of the bar and there was rocker music on the inside. Gerry latched her hand around my wrist.

"His name is Vaper. I don't know enough about him. For a long time the Devils haven't had anyone running the show. He's not one to fuck with, but we're trying to team up so let's see where this goes. We can just sit at the bar and chill for a minute until we can see what's going on in the space."

"Okay. A sorta plan. A whiskey can't hurt, even if I don't drink it."

Gerry and I exchanged a brief smile, what was I thinking? This was the most ludicrous of plans and the wildest thing I'd done in my life. A heavy weighted cloud of darkness existed in the space as we walked in. Standing behind the bar, a bartender who was dressed in all black and both of his ears had one of those hole earrings that opened up the ear and left a wide hole. He had a nose ring making him look like a bull. There were patches out of his eyebrow which was arched looking at us both. A redhead and a brunette in the bar. On the left side was an old lady in leather with fringes at the bottom of her jacket and her black hair also had a fringe that ran to the top of her eyebrows. She was dressed in black and her eyeliner was so heavy it made her look like a raccoon. Her



eyes took us in for a moment and then her look went back to being vacant. A hard lump raised in my throat as we took two timid steps towards the bar and sat down. As I sat on the stool the bartender spoke to us gruffly.

"Ladies. What brings you to Death Den tonight? Never seen you here before. Forgive me if I'm wrong, but it doesn't really seem like your kind of place."

"We've been out riding and we just wanted to come in for a-" I lifted my hand to my mouth as if I was cupping a drink. It was a stupid, involuntarily nervous gesture and I didn't know why I did it. "You know, a drink." I coughed hard attempting to release the lump in my throat which quickly became replaced with sweaty palms.

"Fair enough. What will it be for you both?"

"Do you do vodka and cranberry? I'm trying to watch my weight." Gerry said to him with a cheery smile.

He chuckled and opened up an ugly grin. "I'm more than happy to watch it for you." Gerry rolled her eyes and reflexed my elbow to stop her in case he saw. She didn't respond back as he leaned forward and his eyebrows formed a V in front of me. "What will it be for the spicy redhead?"

"It will be an apple whiskey. Can you make me one of those?" I asked.

"Sure can, it's been a while since anyone has asked for one of those, but it makes sense," he said as if he possessed some sort of bartender's manual to tell a person by their drinks. I'm sure he did.

I didn't dare look around the place until I ordered the drinks. We sat at the bar and I felt the blood drain from my legs as a man approached and I cased the place. On the wall were guns with devil horns underneath. No announcement that we were in Devil territory by way of a sign, but it was enough to let us know.

The man reeked of sweet bourbon although he wasn't sweet. He was burly with faded green tattoos where the ink had decided it didn't like the skin it was on and turned gangrene. His feathery handlebar mustache gave me the heebie-jeebies and there was liquid on the ends of it.

"You ladies are looking sweet tonight. Best looking broads in the place. You come in here looking for a good time?" He leered as Gerry pulled me back and the bartender watched. He held out his hand to me.

"I'm Bruce, but my friends - the Devils over there call me Spyder. You can be my friend, too. What should I call you? I know, Firetruck!" He laughed as his breath landed on my face and I wiped it as if the energy would feed into my body somehow.

"Bruce, I'm Peta and this is my friend Gerry." He stuck his hand out to shake her hand and when she offered it he pulled back and winked as he wheezed.

"Ah, gotcha, too quick."

"Too quick my ass," Gerry muttered under her breath and I gave her a silent scolding look. She was going to get us shot if she kept going. Spyder popped his head up like a periscope to look at her.

"What did you say?" he asked, shooting Gerry a look of death. The name of the bar was a fit at this point. As I looked over into the shadowy corner at the men sitting there, all I could see was dark pupils piercing through the darkness.

"Nothing, I'm enjoying this drink. I think I might get another one." His hard stare remained on her face and then all of a sudden he broke into a smile.

"You ladies should come over to the corner and come play with us. We don't bite."

"Why don't they come over here? We need to tell the truth. We are actually looking for someone." Gerry's solemn admission to a man who looked like he'd shanked a few people in his time blew me away. By this point, my stomach was on fire and rolling itself up into a ball. I didn't want to be in the bar anymore and I felt like my misplaced anger had led me down a rabbit hole with no way back to the top.

"Now I thought you two fine ladies didn't just happen to land in our bar, much to our good fortune. What can I or who can I help you with?"

"We're looking for the president of the Devils of Destruction," Gerry punched out.

The guy stood up and stood back from us as the smell of his leather vest performed a nasal cavity assault on my senses, and the bourbon added the final jolt.

"That's a big ask, little lady, to call the president over to you, but he's around. What's it involved with?" The conversation had shifted to Spyder trying to pick us up to a more sinister tone.

"We need some help ambushing the Guardians. We just want to give them a little scare." I put my hand on Gerry's knee to stop her from her verbal diarrhea. The exit was looking like the best place for us to be in the moment, but to my amazement she kept going. "We don't want them dead or anything like that. One of them broke into her house and she wants to get them back-" I clamped my hand over Gerry's mouth to stop her from speaking. My affronting and ferocious look went over her head as she tried to talk through my hand and I felt the moisture of her lips on it so I took it away.

"The Guardians?" Spyder narrowed his eyes at us both. "Story is interesting enough, but if you want us to ambush them then it's going to take more than a request." That's when I felt my head start spinning and my stomach begin to become queasy.

"Wait a minute... are you making a sex request, big guy?" I forgot about the fact that when Gerry got nervous she started to burst out every racing thought that was in her head, and there was no turning back now.

"If you're giving it up like that. That's not exactly what I meant. I'm talking cold hard cash," Spyder said.

"Cold hard cash. That's what we like to talk in terms of." Spyder turned his head to the side as his cold, dark eyes ran the length of her. "Although you look pretty hot and tasty, we might be able to take your offer as compensation." His voice was disgusting and dripping with grossness.

"You are not going to pimp us out. We don't have money and my request was legit, but don't worry about it." I grabbed Gerry's arm and hooked it into mine. I wanted her to come with me now.

"Stop. He might be feeling generous. No need to get yourself tied up in knots. You're attractive women in our lair, what did you expect?" My eyes weren't on his lips; they were on his thick, black eyebrows as they joined together. The ball of queasiness in my stomach continued.

"I guess. We are, that's true." Gerry was trying to see his point of view and I elbowed

herself hard that she yelped.

"What did you do that for? Jesussss! That freaking hurt." My eyes were cutting into her like glass that had broken on the ground and been stepped on by one unlucky person.

"Be right back, ladies. I might come back with good news. Don't try and run." He read my mind because the next thing I was about to do with Gerry in tow was run out the door, but I saw him eclipse into the darkness and come back with a guy who made me break out in a sweat.

His face was tanned and he looked like he'd been out in the sun too long. His hair was long like Rip's, and the irony of that hit me like a freight train. He had an oblong shaped face and his nose was long with a hooked tip. He had a toothpick in his mouth and his eyes were small and squinty.

"Ladies. Ladies. I hear we have a problem with the Guardians?" His voice wasn't overly deep, in fact, it was a little on the high side. His face was covered with two day stubble and he appeared to be genuinely excited about the prospect of pursuing the Guardians.

"We don't necessarily have a problem with the Guardians." I wanted out. Being in the Devils' Den was a mistake and I knew it.

"We do needsome help, we want to teach one of them a lesson." Gerry's mouth was proving to be like a freight train and one I didn't want to be on. The more she kept talking the more she kept running us deeper into trouble.

"Which one is that? I want to know who's causing you pretty ladies so much trouble," he said in a sultry voice.

"His name is Rip. He's an ex con."

"Gerry, I swear to god, shut up! We have to go, this has all been a mistake." I found out about the Devils' president's reflexes. They were incredibly sharp as he dug his wiry hand into my arm. He didn't smell like whiskey like the others. He smelled like hell and sandalwood mixed together. It was enticing in the worst way. My stomach was trembling and it was way too close to my seat. He was hovering over it and making me want to move away from him as soon as humanly possible.

"It's not a mistake. You came here for a reason and we should get to the bottom of it. I'm actually willing to help you ladies out just as a favor. This oughta be fun for us."

"Well, what do we do now?" Gerry asked as he looked at us both and then back at his crew.

"First thing is I need both your numbers. I will call you with the next steps. How about that? I can't let you come all this way and go back empty handed." The creep factor of this guy was through the roof and I crossed my leg over just so I could get away from him.

We handed over our number to Vaper and we got the hell out of there. As soon as we got out into the open air my lungs released the kept breath that I had stored.

"That was the most insane thing I have ever done in my life. That was completely nuts." My heart was in overdrive and I regretted being inside the Devils' Den. I wanted to be back in Santa Fe and get back to normality.

"It was a good type of nuts and I enjoyed it," Gerry said smiling in the dark. She was

looking right at the bar and staring at it all googly eyed.

"Gerry, what the fuck are you talking about? That was horrific! I let my anger get out of control. I think when they call us we have to call it off. There's no way we can go through with it now. You said it yourself, we don't have any problems with the Guardians." Now it was me doing the fast talking.

"Let's enjoy the adventure. I'm sure they're not stupid. They're not going to go in there guns blazing or anything."

"You are naive and I'm- I don't know what I am. I can't even believe that I convinced you to come here in the first place. Why did you listen to me?" I yelled as I cranked my bike and rolled on my helmet.

"Because you're my friend and you needed my help." Gerry gave me her most logical answer and there was nothing I could do about that.

"This could have been one of those times when I wished you weren't such a good friend." I cranked the engine and took off into the dark and out of the eerie pit of the Devils' playground as we rode in single file down a dark road. I was relieved once we got out onto the freeway and we both got home.

Gerry dropped me off first. "I guess we'll all have to be in now. It looks like it's the Rumlbers and the Devils against the Guardians."

"No. We can't do it. I've calmed down now and I was being crazy. My parents will flip out. There's no way. They have no idea what I'm doing."

A breakdown was coming, I was sure of it. I get inside and process what I've done. "I feel like the most insane woman on the planet."

"You are not. It's going to be okay. They will probably forget about the whole thing. Vaper didn't even ask you to come over to his table or anything. He just left us there." Gerry was making excuses and I figured she was trying to convince herself about things that were unconvincable.

"Bye Gerry. Call me or I'll call you. If the Devils call you first let me know."

"Don't you worry, I definitely will do that." I was so spooked by the Devils' Den that I slept with the lights on and barely slept a wink.

"WE HAVE A DATE AND A TIME. Two days from now. I've managed to get ten of my guys on deck. How many of your girls do you have?" It was Vaper on the phone two days later and he was not kidding. The call felt surreal and I didn't even know if I was really on the phone to him or not.

"I might have been too hasty in the things I said. We don't have to do this. We can resolve it another way. I think it's a bad idea now."

Vaper laughed at my suggestion with a high pitch. "Too late honey bunch, we're going ahead with it. You asked for the favor and that's not the way we do things in the Devils, we follow through. You're lucky we're coming through for you, so you have to hold up your end of the bargain, too. We are going to be at the warehouse on Saturday at three.

They have that bar running then which I know you know about. That's the perfect time before they open. I don't plan on shooting civilians, but if they get fresh out of the mouth then I might." His laugh was ghastly and it made me balk.

My hand stretched out to the counter to steady myself. No backing down. Life was about to get ugly. All of the initial anger that I felt for Rip had subsided, and now I felt pity for him and started to see that it was a mistake that he made a long time ago. I wanted to warn him, and as if by telepathy Vaper answered my thoughts out loud.

"If you warn them, I'm going to have to punish you. The punishment ain't gonna be one you like, either." Vaper chortled down the phone. "I can count on you to be there right? You gotta remember you asked for our help, and on this one I'm more than happy to assist you."

"I wish you weren't so eager to assist," I muttered.

"You won't wish that when we get payback on your behalf. Don't worry, we're just gonna shake them up a little. Nothing too hardcore. It's gonna teach the lesson you want right?"

I let the silence be there and processed the fact that me and the girls were about to walk into a situation that was beyond my stratosphere and intensely dangerous. "Are you going to bring guns?"

"No doubt. Guns will be front and center. That's what we do. Gun warfare."

"Gun warfare? I don't know that we have to bring the guns. Is that necessary?" A quivering voice didn't help me any.

"Three p.m. Be there." The phone clicked dead. This was a shitty predicament to be in and I wanted out immediately.

I called the girls to let them know what they were in for. I didn't even know if they would back me. I rang Michaela and explained the whole scenario to her. I didn't do that right away because I was hoping it was a bad dream that we were in that dive bar and that I would return from the dream unscathed.

"You what? Have you lost every part of your mind? You expect us to go there and ambush the Guardians and these guys have guns, too?" Michaela was so mad she was yelling at me. I didn't blame her, and all I could do was take the hits.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry. Please don't hate me or kick me out of the club. I need your help, Michaela. I don't think anything is going to go down. It's not that bad."

"Oh, it's not that bad? It's worse than bad, and you have no idea about the reputation of the Devils. Those guys are thugs to the core."

"I'm hoping that it's a bad dream, but I keep pinching myself and I'm here in the flesh."

"Are you working at the shelter on Saturday?"

"Nope. I can't anyway. I have to go do this. I'm the one that started all of this and now it looks like I have to see it through."

"We're going to back you no matter what. The Guardians aren't going to shoot us. I know that much, but lining up with the Devils was the worst decision ever. I knew you were mad, but I didn't know you were this mad."

NINETEEN

RIP

I rang Peta a few times, but bombarding her wasn't the way to go. I wanted to give her time to process everything, but at this stage I felt powerless about the state of our relationship. It was in tatters. The second half of the day let me know how far off we were .

We were in our normal routine in preparation for the bar to open. The sun was shining outside and I was gloomy on the inside, but I had a plan. I'd made my mind up that I was going to woo Peta back by going to the animal shelter. I was trying to come up with the right plan first. I couldn't just walk in and sweep her off her feet with no grand gesture.

The downfall was that I was back to smoking, and while I was puffing O rings into the sky was when the thunder of bikes coming our way roared into view. Instantly I saw it was the Devils. I stubbed out my cigarette and turned right into the warehouse as Mustang stepped forward.

"Get your guns. We got Devils." I moved over the gun rack and pulled mine down. Gunner and Mustang switched gears and moved quickly through the warehouse. Mickey dropped down behind the bar where he kept a gun and emerged with one in hand as I heard the magazine click in place.

"Why?" Mickey shook his head and so did I.

"No idea, but there's a few of 'em. I counted five bikes."

"No way. This isn't what I'm looking at." Mustang's knitted expression was making me nervous. I followed the trail of where his eyes were looking. In front of us were ten Devils and all five of the Rumlbers, and now I felt even more like a dipshit because the reason they were aligned all stemmed from me.

"Son of a donkey's balls. This isn't really happening, is it? That's Peta. I need to rub my eyes again because I'm pretty sure she's in front of me standing with the Devils and that can't be right. I need to rub them again." I put my hands over my eyes and rubbed hard because there was no way in hell that Peta would be lined up with our biggest rival in front of our warehouse.

When I rubbed my eyes she was still there - it wasn't a mirage. That flaming red hair was the same color as her flaming red cheeks. The depth of her hate for me must have ran deep because she was straddled across her bike with all her bike sisters and the Devils. She had no idea what she was doing.

Stunt, who was out back joined us. Four of us and that was it. Mickey, me, Mustang and Gunner, but to me I counted them as two given their special forces capabilities. The first person I wanted to talk to and clear things up with was Peta. All ten bikes were lined up across the driveway of our warehouse and the women were off to the side. They had guns because I saw the barrels of them. Peta didn't know what she had activated because this was dangerous and people could die over this. Locking eyes with her was hard because her eyes were shielded with sunglasses.

Peta, look me in the eye and tell me this isn't true. Peta.

Her sunglasses went up on her head a few minutes later as we all got a good look at the Devils face to face. The tension in the air was thick with the promise of death. If I didn't speak now the situation might not have been salvageable.

"Peta? Is it worth it?" I called out with my brothers fully armed. Mustang's arms was locked on his gun. Mickey was just a kid and I knew was shaking inside was standing tall with his gun in hand. We were in a standoff staring down the barrel of our enemies.

"I'm sorry... I..." she tried to speak but a seedy ass guy that had some similar looking traits to me emerged from straddling his bike. All anyone could hear was the clop of his boots hitting the ground and he stood in front of the ten. I felt sorry for him because he was wide open and he didn't seem to care. He was just out there for everybody to see without a care in the world.

"She's done talking, we're here of our own accord. Nice to get a good look at you all. Outnumbered I would say. Fifteen to four is not a pretty number. I hear one of you likes to burgle houses, so you know I said to myself and the crew let's just come on over and see what the Guardians are doing these days." This guy was on a suicide mission and that's all I saw. My heart felt like it was about to give out from the depth of my heartbeat. My eyes narrowed down the line to look at Gunner.

Gunner had a grin on his face and that wasn't a good sign when we were in battle. Gunner had a switch and if you flipped it, the results proved to be deadly. I prayed for minimal bloodshed, and I was a guy that never backed down from a fight, but we weren't prepared for this and we all knew it.

"I think the whole thing has been blown out of proportion. You should stand down because people are going to get hurt and you have ladies with you. We have beef as a club, but there's no reason to turn this into an afternoon of death," Mustang presented his case, but the stringy muscles of his forearms stayed locked and if need be he would pull the trigger. My pained expression looked over at Peta who was now crying and I knew what happened. She'd gotten mixed up and now it was too late. All the women looked like they were ready to pee their pants and I couldn't blame them. They were obviously supporting Peta and were looking said and sorry for themselves.

"Oh, we're not going to do that. But I wanted to definitely come down and see for myself. Name's Vaper, and the name will be ringing off your lips because you're going to be hearing it a lot. See, I'm the club president and I'm a fan of the ladies so when the young redhead over here tells me the Guardians had been causing trouble, I said no way." Vaper as he called himself turned to the ten bikes and left his back wide open and laughed like a hyena and faced us all again. "I said no, not the goody two shoes



Guardians. The ones that tried to clean up the meth labs in Edgewood. Not them. That couldn't be them, could it?" The Devils were feeling mighty confident with their line up, but they shouldn't have been because my money was on Gunner shooting one of their tires out and making them retreat like the last time they tried to ambush us.

"A big misunderstanding is all and you should stay out of it. It's between Rip and his lady friend. You shouldn't have dragged them into it." Mustang was still trying to cover the situation and keep it from shifting into a riot but I was tapping my gun against my thigh with the any moment thought in my head.

"You've got me mistaken because your ladies came into our bar. All the way to Sedillo and we were tickled pink about it, let me tell you." Vaper was mocking us all and I felt like a fool.

"I think this has gone too far and we can all calm down. Nobody needs to get dealt with today. We came to support our girl," the African American girl of the group called out and I knew her to be Willow.

"A little too late to advocate for peace now, you've brought the destructors here," I shouted at her .

"You hear that? We're the destructors." Vaper let out a sneer to his boys behind him.

"Destructors and we got some nice friends with us, as well, to help us along with the destructive plan," one of them yelled out.

Gunner, whose sunglasses were on, stepped forward and lifted his gun. I heard the girls gasp as the situation got more real. We were about to be in a gun slinging fight with the Devils on our own turf. I saw the torture in Peta's eyes as she looked at the scene that she helped orchestrate. I could understand it. What I did that night was despicable, but this wasn't the way to resolve it.

Turns out all the smoking wasn't helping my lungs, and I probably should've stopped a long time ago. Wheezy breaths were rising from my chest and I sucked them in as me and Peta stared at one another for a short period of time.

"You bitches need to get off our turf before I start picking you off one by one. You got time to go. You already tried to do this and it didn't work last time, did it?" Mustang watched Gunner but he didn't stop him. Gunner's method looked like a walking death wish, but it was so crazy that it might just work. He walked forward with his gun tilted at Vaper's head. Vaper, whose eyes were darker than midnight, stood there laughing. Two crazy men facing off and it would be us picking up the shrapnel. Gunner kept his gun trained on his head and I'd heard about Gunner's episodes.

"It's alright. He's under control," Mustang said. "He's got it. See how the other guys are getting on their bikes. He's got it." Gunner had taken a chance to call Vaper's bluff to see how strong a leader he was. The other Devils were on their bikes and their engines were starting to run. Vaper's eyes were shifting around him because he could hear the noise of the other bikes turning over and he knew.

Vaper put his arms out and I saw the devil horns underneath his arm. "What are you going to do? Shoot me? You're the big shot that's going to splatter my head all over the pavement?" Vaper asked a valid question. Right now, whatever issues me and Peta were having were non-existent.

"If I have to I will. So what are you going to do? Back down or step up? Your crew are smart, you see, and are on their way out. I think you should do the same thing because I have a nasty habit of accidentally pulling triggers without warning. Do you want to find out what this bullet feels like in your skull? I can make it so it bypasses the major centers of the brain so you can at least live like a vegetable."

Vaper had no regard for his safety or his health. He took the butt of the gun and shoved it down looking at Gunner dead in the eye. Gunner, who towered over him, crossed his arms over his chest.

"Come on, Vaper! Let's go. It's not worth it, man," one of his crew called out as the sweat dropped down the middle of my chest. Smart guy.

"Nah, nah, nah. He's not going to shoot me. He's smarter than that. We're just having a conversation. A nice chat right, Guardian? You thought you could spread your wings into another city and that we wouldn't find you? Doesn't work like that. Tried to shut down our operation and now you wonder why we're trying to light you up. Killed our boys in that shoot out. You thought we forgot about it and we were just going to die out? Nope. The Devils are still good and we're here to stay. You can't kill us off like that. Not gonna happen." Vaper broke down the beef pretty quickly, but I noticed he'd backed away from Gunner. He was talking tough but his footing was slipping. The girls were backing their bikes away and they were faced toward the street.

"I look forward to the challenge, because last time I checked this was a free country, but for right now you gotta get off our turf." Gunner tacked a nail in the coffin as Vaper shook his head and looked to the ground for a minute. He tucked his dark straggly hair behind one ear and looked up into the eyes of Gunner.

"Okay, I'll do you a solid and get off your turf. Just this one time, but just know that I will be back and that it's not over between us as a crew."

"I have no doubt that it isn't, but my finger is getting itchy so I need you to leave right now."

Vaper scoffed, pivoted and walked back to his bike. Gunner stood like a steel pole with his gun over his chest as he waited for Vaper to slide his helmet on. He did painfully slow and as the engine roared my wheezing stopped. We'd made it through. Bikes turned one by one as gravel spit out behind their tires. The Rumlbers did the same and the wheezing came back because they had a link to the Devils, and through the chain of events that had been set in motion and the Devils not getting what they want they might not be able to recover from them.

Sadness hit me as the back of Peta's hair flapped in the breeze. If anything I'd lost her and even with her bringing the Devils to our backyard I was pining over what could have been.

As we all left to turn our backs, Mickey blurted out, "That shit was crazy! What the hell happened there?" . That's when the destruction hit. The ringing of a gunshot cutting through the air.

"Mickey! Get down!" Gunner barked, but it was too late. Mickey clutched his arm as Gunner swiveled on his front foot and fired off three rounds. He didn't hit anything and I jogged the short distance to Mickey as he dropped to one knee.

"My shoulder. Shit. I've been hit. My shoulder," Mickey groaned.

Stunt was already on the phone calling the ambulance. He nodded to me and I jogged in to the first aid kit as Gunner and Mustang assisted him. I was looking for the case of crepe bandages that I knew were inside the kit.

I found the roll and ran back with Mickey's gray t-shirt soaked in blood. Mustang gestured to me for the roll as I unraveled it without speaking and wrapped Mickey's shoulder. "Water. Let's get him some water. The ambulance will be here. They have an eight minute response time normally. I know because I've had to call them before. It's grazed through the top half, it's a flesh wound."

Mickey was breathing in and out and his forehead was doused in sweat. "Flesh wound. I'm hurting here. Are you for real? Why are people always shooting at me? I must be the weakest link," Mickey groaned softly. Stunt was still on the phone and the sirens were ringing loudly in the background. The ambulance came around the eight minute mark just like Mustang said.

The guys had it covered and from all the events that were going on right in front of me I was struggling to reconcile the hatred and vengeance that I managed to draw out in Peta. I put my hands up over my head to open up my chest as I paced the parking lot. I really needed to stop smoking, and if this wasn't the moment to do it then I didn't know when the moment would be.

Peta was much, much more than I bargained for, and for all appearances I was more in love with her now more than ever. The ambulance arrived and slid out the gurney as Stunt and Mustang explained the circumstances. Gunner approached me off to the side as I attempted to make sense of everything.

"Trippy?" His eyebrow arched as if we'd just gotten back from a lunch date.

"Sure was. I can't believe it. I've never seen her like that. I didn't know she had that in her, Gunner." I squinted at him as the ambulance left with Mickey in it. I knew he was going to be okay and that was the main thing. "I think I'm in love."

Gunner broke out into wild laughter and clapped me on the shoulder. "Rip, you're the trip. She just shot Mickey. What the fuck is on your mind?"

My eyes glazed over as I thought about me and Peta together. "She's mad. I don't want that anger directed toward me, but I like the fire in her. That's fire that I don't mind blazing with. The beauty with the red hair. There's more to her, she's phenomenal."

Gunner was too busy wiping the tears away from his face and another bike raced into the space. Gunner's face dropped from deadpan to lethal killer in a matter of seconds as he drew his gun along with Mustang. The guy who rode in on his sports bike put his leather gloved hands up in the air without turning off the engine.

"Don't shoot! It's Crunch." Gunner lowered his gun as Crunch took his helmet off his head. His eyes went straight to the patch of blood on the ground.

"What I miss?"

"You missed the Devils riding on our turf and shooting one of our own. Welcome to the Guardians. Still up for it?" Mustang asked him.

"Hell yeah, I am. Why were they here?"

"You might wanna talk to Rip about that," Mustang smirked as I skimmed my fingers

over my already throbbing forehead.

"I can't talk about it right now, but it was a beautiful nightmare I know that much."

"Right. Well, if I can help out let me know. This ain't nothing new to me," he said with a wide grin. He was going to fit right in.

"It was Mickey, who is going to run alongside you and be your wingman with the club books. What we talked about already," Mustang explained.

"Ah, got it. Gunshot wound to where?"

"Shoulder. Flesh wound only. I'm going to the hospital later to check in on him. I'm sure he's gonna call in."

"You betcha. Tabitha just called," Stunt held up his phone. "Nothing touched in terms of arteries or major muscle groups. He's going to be fine."

"Thank god," I muttered trying to pat around my pockets for my cigarettes. I only carried two so I didn't smoke more than that. I pulled the crooked cigarette out of my pocket as I shoved it in my mouth, cursing that I didn't have a lighter.

"You still want to join the Guardians?" I asked Crunch who provided the light.

"Yep. This is my lane. No sweat here. Glad it's only a graze. We need him. He's pretty good behind that bar."

Stunt went over and shook his hand. "We're glad you're here man. Welcome to the adventure of the Guardians."

TWENTY

## PETA

One of the worst experiences of my life and I was sitting in my apartment trembling with my girls around me. Guns being pointed in people's faces. Lives were on the line and seeing them in front of me in real life and not in movies was traumatizing with a capital T. My head was in my hands and I was sobbing and breaking down from the mess that I'd caused.

"What did I do? I'm so, so sorry, girls. I got you caught up in my stupidity. I don't know what I was thinking. I would never shoot anybody. I don't want to see anybody hurt. I made a mistake," I wept as the tears drenched my jeans and Willow rubbed my back.

"Hey, relax, we were stupid enough to be your sisters and ride with you. I'm glad nobody got shot, either. That was like some crazy wild, wild west shit. That Vaper guy is off. He just stood there while he had a gun to his face. I don't want to see him again. You should delete his number. I'm just glad that he doesn't know where you live." I burst into tears again because if he wanted to find out where I lived he could.

Michaela sighed. "I could say I told you so, but if I found out I was dating someone who broke into my family home when I was younger I would probably want to fuck him all the way up. I don't know. It's a tough one," she said with resignation.

My eyes were puffed up and Michaela flopped her hand over with a tissue in it, and I blew away the snot and the carelessness of my wrong decision. "I'm fine, you don't have to stay with me. You can go now."

"No, we won't go. We are going to stay and we are going to order pizza, wine and play silly board games so we can remember what real life is like," Michaela chided as Gerry got out her phone.

"I'm going to call for the pizza now. Who wants what?"

So the girls stayed and we ate pizza, and I pretended that we weren't involved in a stand-off with a rival motorcycle club, but that pretense didn't last so long because when I went to bed and the girls were sprawled out on my living room floor, Rip's disappointed eyes looking through me swirled around my head. I pulled the sheets tighter and swung from side to side pulling the sheets over me. Once they were good and soaked I got up and splashed some cold water over my face.

I watched the water drip down my face. Me and Rip were messed up and we both had

issues to deal with now. I felt like in a way I'd leveled the score, although if I was to look at the situation objectively Rip paid the price already by being in jail, and I was making him pay again by almost having him killed. As I stared back at my red hair and pale face I realized that I might be the villain. I might be the one that was deranged and unfair because there was no way that I knew I had that inside of me.

"What have you become, Peta?" I asked myself the question tenderly when I looked in the mirror. I touched my hand to it and dragged it down the mirror.

Creeping back to the front of the room the girls were all warm and bundled up with pizza boxes opened and crusts everywhere. Light snores were coming out of Gerry and Lisa's mouths, and I smiled because at least I had my girls to help me through this crisis I was having. I grabbed a glass of water and some cookies from the jar and went back to my room. After a little while longer of beating myself up I fell back asleep. By the time I woke up the next morning the drinks from the night before were swimming around my brain. I had to work but not until the afternoon.

I got up and wiped the sleep from my eyes greeting my ride or die sisters who were already up and making breakfast. The place smelled like pancakes and eggs. I frowned because I didn't know where they found the ingredients.

"Are you cooking breakfast in here? What is going on?"

"Yes, we are. We got pancakes, I had to get some flour because that flour you have in your pantry is old, honey. It's no good at all. I got some maple syrup, too. My pancakes are the best. So fluffy." Lisa was busy bragging about her culinary skills as Gerry pulled apart her pancake to test out her cakes.

"You're right, it is fluffy. Nice." Lisa smacked her hand lightly with the spatula.

"I told you that, now get out of here. Everything is nearly done." Lisa made Gerry scuttle out of the kitchen as Michaela shoved orange juice in my hand.

"Here. Drink." I happily took her orders and sipped on the vibrant colored liquid feeling the cool tang of it hit my taste buds. Instantly my groggy morning fog lifted right up and I started to feel ten times better.

"Good?" she asked as she drained the last of her drink.

"Just what I needed. Thank you." I hugged her tightly.

"I have to get out of here after breakfast, but I think you should talk to Rip. You shouldn't leave all this mess hanging. Finish it and sort it out."

"I plan to. I don't know what to say to him now that I had him almost killed."

"You'll figure it out and in a way you can call it a clean slate. Now you can get to the loving part of the relationship. What about that?"

We giggled together as I flopped my head onto her shoulder in dismay. "I'm a killer now running with bad boys. I must not have that bad boy attraction magnet out of my body yet."

"Maybe not, but it's working for ya."

"Ewww," I said to her as Lisa called all of us to the table. We ate and talked about the night and by the time we finished I felt restored in the best way, ready to face the music with Rip and at work.

I rode my bike to the animal shelter and the morning started with good news as all

the animals that were displaced found their forever homes. If this was any indication of the rest of the day then there was hope for me yet. I followed the usual routine and sought respite out in the sun as my phone rang.

My womanly instincts told me it was Rip, and sure enough, when my eyes hit the phone it was him. "Hi, don't hang up. I think we should get together without guns and talk. Are you on break? I want to sort things out with you."

"I agree, I'm at the shelter so if you want to come down here I'm in the park behind it."

"Okay, give me ten minutes and I will be there." I hung up the phone not knowing if we were too close to the fire to keep on talking. I ran my hands back and forth over the ripples of the table trying to work out my nerves as I waited for Rip to arrive. Fifteen minutes later a presence behind me made themselves known.

"Hi Peta." I swung my feet from underneath the bench and faced Rip. He looked like shit, his beard hadn't been shaved and his mustache was hanging over his lip slightly. When I looked at his tigerish eyes I felt my heart thump. The feelings were still there and not even hidden. They were on full display for Rip to see.

"Can I sit down or are you going to sick the Devils on me?" He smirked and I knew it was his attempt at a horrible joke, but even if it was too soon I laughed because things were horrendous between us.

"I'll let you sit this time. I don't know how many times I can say sorry. I guess I see red when it comes to my family." I was feeling shameful for what I did, but not the reason I did it.

"Hey, I get it, and I kind of don't blame you. If it were my family and I had to defend them I would probably do the same." Rip sat down beside me and my fingers had become so used to being interlaced with his that I found it hard to stop myself from linking my fingers through his.

I did take a deep, longing look at them though. "I tried to kill you so I guess we are even in a way." It was Rip's turn to laugh and it was a real laugh because the edges of his eyes crinkled up and he wiped the tears from his eyes.

"You did. I admire your tenacity, and to be honest, it's made me like you a little bit more." His impromptu admission made me sit up and look at him.

"You do? We are the biggest mess ever. Maybe we have too much water under the bridge and we can't do this now." I was feeling doubtful. I know what Rip just said, but it was nuts to think we could recover from this as a couple.

"I'm going to change your name to Fireball. That should be your MC name. Do you have one?"

"I don't. I'm just Peta." I pressed my flyaways back from my face and looked at him.

"No, you're not. You're a fireball. I'm shocked, but it's a shock that I like. Mickey is okay, by the way. He's got a flesh wound, but he's all stitched up. It's going to take him some time to recover though.

"What do you mean?" Flesh wound? Who had a flesh wound? "Nobody got hurt right?" My pulse thumped hard on the inside. "If someone was harmed I would feel so bad."

Rip's hand covered mine and that invisible link of growing love sprung alive between



us. "You didn't know that Vaper shot him? He shot him on the ride off," Rip explained.

"Ugh. This is worse than I thought. Now the Guardians are going to hate me. I have to come and apologize. I made a mistake. I'm coming down there. You have to know it was out of character for me to do that."

"Don't worry about being out of character with me, I'm always out of character. It doesn't matter one little bit. I'm sorry that I put your family through hell. That time I spent in the jail cell taught me a lot about myself. I might not have been responsible for that robbery, but I sure as hell was responsible and involved in a lot of others." Rip's wisdom was evident as he sat next to me.

"I understand that now. I tried to make them stop from coming to attack you. That Vaper guy is extreme and he was happy when I told him about coming to get you guys. There's something that's really wrong with him."

"He's a nutcase and that's no joke, but he's the new leader of the Devils and if he's a loose cannon then it's even worse." Rip presented his worst fears as a wave of concern flickered over his forehead. "We don't know how or where they will hit us, if he's so rogue as to take you up on your random revenge quest then who knows what else he would be willing to do."

"That's a good point, and when we went to Sedillo we were calling his bluff. Gerry did most of the talking and I wanted to get out of there as fast as I could. It was too late because once Vaper heard the name 'Guardians' he wanted heads to roll."

"That's not surprising. The one good thing that's come out of this is that we've got a good look at the jokers that want to support this president and what he's about. That's the most important thing."

"I messed things up, we did the charity ride with you guys. Are the Guardians angry at us?"

"Mickey's not the happiest with you, but the guys know why you did it and so do I. I'm here and you're here. I don't feel any less for you and that to me is incredible. Maybe love is blind or something like that." Rip skipped over the three little words that most women want to hear from their love interest.

"Did you say what I thought you just said?"

"What?" Rip's eyebrows took a hike upwards as his mouth twitched a little.

"Did you just say that you loved me?"

"I might have said something along those lines, but it doesn't take away from the fact that you basically put out a hit on me through one of our biggest rivals," he smirked at me. "Must be something in the Guardian water or something because Bell Marco tried to kill Axle, the enforcer of the Edgewood club, and now they're married with a baby. They say the road to love ain't easy."

"Wow. Axle? That's the big guy with the huge shoulders, right? That guy?" The more time me and Rip spent together the more his world became interesting to me. The Guardians sure had a load of stories.

"Yep. That's the guy." Rip said. "But I don't want to talk about him. I want to talk about us. What are we going to do? Also, you didn't answer me back when I said I loved you." Rip wasn't going to let it go and I knew the answer. I knew that I wanted to tell him

that I loved him.

"I have to apologize to the Guardians. I want the girls to come, too. We raised all that money for charity together and now look at how divided we are." Sadness caught in my throat and the idea of me and Rip together was starting to feel like oil mixed together with water.

"Okay, you can do that, but you still haven't answered me. Are we going somewhere, Peta, or was that spark of revenge just that?"

"No, Rip, it wasn't. The revenge was because I was mad at you and I wanted to hurt you for what you did, but I guess I wouldn't have gotten that mad if it weren't for the fact that I was in love with you, too."

"Come again? You love me, too? Don't say it if you don't mean it. I want to know where we stand. I want to know that you care about me as much as I care about you because I'm here and the guys think I'm freaking crazy. I'm starting to think I'm crazy, as well." Rip's sigh ripped through the air and I inched closer to him and grabbed the sides of his cheeks so they sunk in a little bit.

"Rip. I'm crazy in love with you. I'm still the girl that you made love to at the river. That's me." The overwhelming sensation to kiss him took over me as I let my lips sink into his and I kissed him hard. He didn't pull back as I reduced the pressure on his face.

"There's no keeping us apart, we're meant to be flames together. You and I. Fishing, loving, riding and all sorts together. Let's keep the fighting to a minimum because you don't know how to fight well." I laughed with a fire in my belly that Rip put there and I thought of my connection to Rogue.

"Good, because I love your dog, too, and I would hate to miss out on seeing Rogue. I might even love him as much as I love you."

"I love it when you tell me that. I love hearing you say that you love me. Makes me all glowy right in here." Rip with his quirky and oddball nature touched the center of his chest and made a circle.

"Rip, I know it's going to be a trip with you, but let's call it even Steven. How about it?"

"You can pay me in kisses when you come stay over at my house this weekend and other favors that I might need to do. Don't worry, you're going to like the favors."

I grimaced and swiped Rip with my hand. We were a dynamic duo and our love story was strange, but we were alive, together in one piece and I'd finally managed to let go of the past, and in a way it shaped my future because I ended up with the same person that robbed my house.

We got up together and Rip walked back into the animal shelter, the very place where we first connected. Our love story was definitely one that could get you killed.

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Hope Stone is an Amazon #1 bestselling author and Top 100 Kindle Select Allstar who loves writing steamy action packed, emotion-filled stories with twists and turns that keep readers guessing. Hope's books revolve around alpha men who love protecting their sexy and sassy heroines. When she's not writing binge-worthy books she's a full time "work-at-home" wife and mother of 3 kids, 2 crazy dogs (Nika and Fritz) and 2 badass black cats (Jade and Thundercat).

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### **RIP: GUARDIANS OF MAYEHM MC - SANTA FE CHAPTER (BOOK 5)**

By Hope Stone

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