

Excerpts from *Biker Daddy*, a biker/Russian mob romance.

Sinner

I was an idiot to get so damn drunk. I was barely fit to drop Amy off at school that morning, and my headache was so bad that I immediately went to my room at the clubhouse for a nap

But sleep wasn't coming. All I could think of was Lucy. I'd been half-crazy with whiskey all night, and when I woke up I felt like I'd burned out all my anger. I had to give her a little more credit. Something was up, but it wasn't fair of me to just blame her right out. There was still a chance for us – if I had the guts to give us that chance.

All thoughts of Lucy disappeared when the raid started.

Sonic and deafening, the sound of our front door exploding open in a stampede of boots and foreign shouting. I was on my feet in a second. Half a second. I grabbed my pistol and ran out into the hall; I was only wearing my boxers, but it was the last thing on my mind. A blonde girl, who was about as dressed as I was, ran screaming down the hall. In front of me, I recognized Tank's broad back running in the same direction as me, towards the action.

Taking the stairs two at a time, my heart lurched when the last step slipped out under my heel, a sharp pain from the wood scraping my flesh. One of them - whoever they were - turned in my direction. I shot first, and he crumpled backwards like a rag doll. Tank was roaring around a corner, where more shouting, more shooting, reverberated.

The big living room was empty, but there were a lot of doorways, a lot of places I could go. Someone was raiding us. Two seconds to guess who it was. My brothers' screams rushed like blood in my ears; whichever path I chose, it would put me in the line of fire.

I didn't think twice.

My feet decided for me, as I ran across the living room into the far hallway, where a dead, or dying, Russian lay slumped against a wall. I padded past him, listening for anything, any sort of direction. A shot rang out in the bathroom to my right, followed by a yell of pain.

My palms were slick, but I held my pistol firmly in both hands, raising it to shoot at whoever might appear from the bathroom; I nearly shot Train as he trotted out, dashing sideways, gun still pointed into the doorway.

"Fuckin' Russians!" He roared, seeing me. "They're all over the fuckin' place, Jesus Christ..."

"I'm going up to the kitchen," I said, running past him.

"Basement," Train hollered at my back. "When it's clear, basement. We need..."

To protect the drugs. Right. I waved that I understood, and shouldered my way down the hall, going quickly but pressing myself to the wall just in case. The kitchen lay at the very end, and I could hear clattering and crashing noises from inside. The house was echoing with violence, the kind of noises that'll stick to your ribs like a good stew, but in a bad way. Too many gunshots get your ribs hurting.

I peered around the corner, into the kitchen. One of them was in there, making a goddamn mess of the place, throwing the cabinets open, throwing things around. Looking for the drugs. I had the advantage, and I used it. I crept close enough to get my sights on him, to make sure I wouldn't miss. But just as I pulled the trigger, he turned, and my shot hit nothing but Cheerios.

Oh, fuck.

I knew that face. Everyone knew that face. You couldn't do business in Vernon without knowing that face. Plus, it was damn familiar – at least the eyes were. He sneered, raising his pistol at me, but I rushed him, shoulders driving into his chest, one hand twisting his wrist until the tendons went spongy and he screamed, dropping the gun. We collapsed to the floor together, me on top, still holding my gun. He struggled, but wised up once I stuck the barrel under his chin.

"You motherfucker," I said. Lucy's uncle. Dear old Uncle Alexei. I could shoot him. I *should* shoot him. He was in *our* house, messing with *my* brothers.

He was also *her* family. And family is family is family. You don't go around putting bullets in your old lady's uncle. Not if you want her to stay your old lady. Maybe me and Lucy were fucked already, but killing Alexei would make sure of it.

"Thieves!" He spat. Literally, he spat up into my face. His eyes were going crazy, looking for anything in reaching distance he could use against me. But I was bigger. Much, much bigger. I held him down, my mind racing, my heart howling. What the *hell* was I supposed to do? I had

Alexei Maximovich underneath me, my forearm crushing his throat, my gun under his chin. I could kill him. I could take out the Bratva with one shot. What was he even doing here by himself?

Well, at least that question had an answer. Those crazy, rolling eyes of his - blue, just like Lucy's - landed on something. I heard words from the doorway, and ducked just in time to feel the breeze of a bullet over my shoulder blades. I shifted, peered over my elbow, pointed my pistol and squeezed the trigger, my forearm still holding Alexei to the floor. His man spun backwards, gun flying, curses in another language propelled from his lips like vomit. I didn't have much time; more would come, looking for their boss, making sure he wasn't in exactly this situation.

"We're going to burn you out, we're going to make you pay..." His voice trailed off and he began to study me. His sneer deepened. Something was going on in his head, and I didn't have the time or energy to care about what it was.

"Yeah, yeah," I said. I shifted my weight and grabbed his gun from the floor, sliding the cartridge out and sliding the piece across the floor, under the fridge. Better safe than sorry. "But right now, you're going to listen. I'm going to get to my feet. I'm going to keep my gun on you. You're going to go out that door..." I nudged my chin towards the door that led to the backyard. "And I'm going to go back and kill some more of your friends. But you get to live, alright? *Fuck me!*"

"Don't...want...your...mercy!" he spat, losing steam as my beefy arm crushed his larynx. "...Sinner!"

I did not like the fact that he knew my name. Not at all. I cocked my gun.

"She never...loved you," he coughed out. "She was good, wasn't she?"

My stomach clenched. She told him. When? When he forced her to, or before it even started between us? What else did she tell him? Lucya. Beautiful, blue-eyed Lucya.

"Your daughter," Alexei said. I doubled down on him the minute the last syllable slipped through his lips. Every nerve in my body said to just shoot him. Just blow his fucking brains out. There was no reason not to, if Lucya...

His eyes were desperate with the pain of my body bearing down on him. I hesitated before pulling the trigger, because some part of me was just as desperate as he was. To believe that he was lying. That Lucy would have told me about this raid, if she could. That she...

That second of hesitation damn near killed me. Should have killed me, really. One second I was on top, with the advantage of a literal lifetime. The next, my side was ripped open and splattered red onto the kitchen floor. But the man who shot me got it even worse, when I put a bullet between his eyes.

In that time, the time it took me to take a bullet and give one back, more footsteps pounded the hall, and Tusk's heavy body appeared in the doorway, while Alexei's skinny frame disappeared out the back door. The one I'd offered up, way back when I still believed in that woman who'd spent so many nights in my arms.

Panting, I stumbled backwards until I felt something solid on my back. Then I let myself slide down. I could feel very little - but I remember the feel of my own blood against my back, the smear of it on the wall sliding up between my shoulder blades, one awful line of wet warmth against the cool white plaster of the wall. The world began to fishbowl away from me, every sound swimming through water to get to me.

After that, I didn't feel a goddamn thing.

Lucya

The room was typical: lavish, opulent, antiquated. Everything made of a deep purple velvet, and burnished gold. Garish wrought iron posts framed the bed, stone lions guarding at the foot of it. An olden wooden desk sat under a portrait of some long-dead Maximovich. There were books, at least. I didn't know how long Alexei would keep me locked up here, but at least I wouldn't be bored.

I'd be heartbroken, panicked for my family, scared for Sinner, and full of conflicted regret, but I wouldn't be bored.

The only article of clothing was a royal blue smoking robe, but it beat hell out of my camisole and boxer shorts. For the first few hours of my captivity, I just sat in bed, wrapped in blankets that smelled familiar in only the vaguest of ways, and waited. To hear anything would be a blessing, compared to the cursed silence. Where were the *boyeviks* and *bratoks* that usually

roamed around Alexei's house, either guarding him or meeting with him on business? Where was Deda?

And what about everyone outside of the house? Where was Alyona? Where was Daniil? Where was Alexei?

I feared that Alyona met my same fate, that she hadn't taken my screamed advice to run, and had been waiting like a fish in a barrel when he came back to finish the job. I feared that Daniil may not be "on business" at all, and that "out of town" meant "six feet underground." I feared the worst about Alexei, because every single thing I could imagine was worse than the last.

He knew about Sinner, but even worse, he knew about Amy. Ruthless and heartless, would a man who killed his own brother think twice about slaughtering a toddler just to punish her father?

Kill him, Sinner, I suddenly thought, not entirely surprised by the heat of it burning my mind. *Fucking kill the bastard*

I was so lost in thought I didn't hear when the door opened.

"Lucya," Deda said, closing the door softly behind him. I looked up from where I lay on my side, my head near the foot of the bed, a pillow clutched to my chest.

"Deda," I said, and immediately started crying again. My grandfather was a man of deep contradictions. As violent and ruthless as any Vor before him, but with a gentle love he reserved for his family. In his old age, his body was softer, the wrinkles in his face making it look doughy and cracked, the bushy gray hair of his eyebrows comical. But his eyes never lost their stern sharpness. As a young girl, it was always Deda who I feared as a disciplinarian; even my own father, whose raised voice could rattle the windows, paled in comparison to my grandfather's quiet seething disappointment.

But he wasn't seething or disappointed now. At least, not that I could see. He approached the bed as I lifted myself up to a sitting position. The mattress dipped under his weight when he sat beside me. My tears flowed steadily but silently, my throat raw from screaming and wailing. Deda took my hands into his own, holding them on his lap. He spoke to me in Russian, as always.

"Alexei told me about you," he said. I couldn't imagine what kind of response would be appropriate, but meeting his eyes was too much for me, and I kept them downcast. "He insists that you should be punished."

"How?" I asked.

"Perhaps like this," Deda said. "Right now, he has brought the *boyeviks* to the Rogue Tide. He wants to get revenge."

My heart thudded quickly. I knew this raid was coming, but I never knew when, or how. Of course, it made sense; fuelled by his rage, and without my brother there to try and compel him otherwise, Alexei would act rashly, thoughtlessly. I closed my eyes and tried not to think about the color of blood.

"I didn't do anything wrong," I said softly. "I just fell in love."

"I know, zvyozdochka," Deda said, calling me *little star*. He hadn't called me that in years. "Love is a terrible thing for us. It's in your blood to let it destroy you."

I nodded, wiping my cheeks with the back of my hand, thinking of my parents. How their love sometimes seemed like pain, its heights always matched by its sorrows, their passion and anger taking similar forms.

"I loved your grandmother beyond reason," Deda said. "I shouldn't have. She was from the wrong family. My love killed her."

I'd never heard this story, and finally managed to meet his eyes. He didn't seem like he wanted to expand on it, but he didn't have to. I saw it in his eyes.

"What's going to happen?" I asked.

"I wish I could say," Deda intoned. "I'll talk to Alexei for you, but my son...he hasn't listened to me in a long time."

His voice halted, hesitant to continue, hesitant to stop.

"Alexei was never supposed to lead this family," he finally said, speaking low. "It broke my heart when your father - when we found him. Alexei doesn't have the heart to lead the Bratva. He doesn't even have the balls for it."

He leaned in even further, conspiratorially.

"He is a coward, and always has been," Deda said. Now, those old, wizened, terrifyingly clear eyes flashed. I swear, my heart stopped for a beat, the energy of his words arresting. "Don't think for one second that I don't know what you and your siblings think."

A lump at the bottom of my throat threatened to cut off my airflow as I tried to see what Deda was trying to make me see.

There are always doubts when someone in the Bratva dies. Hard doubts when they're murdered. Sure, plenty of people would have reason to see a man like my father dead. Ivan Maximovich was days away from taking up the mantle of Vor, handed down from my grandfather. All four New England mafia cells would pay tribute to him. He would sit on top of a throne wrought from stolen gold and painted with the blood of anyone who tried to stop him. His younger brother was never meant to sit on that throne, was never trained in the art of leading. He was trained to kill.

Of all the people who'd like to see my father dead, none would have a better chance of seeing that dream come true than his own brother. Who else could have the kind of unquestioned access to my family? Who else could think of getting away with murder in plain sight? Family is sacred, but Alexei worshiped at the altar of envy.

Alexei had to know that my siblings and I suspected him of killing our parents - we sure as hell never accepted him with open arms, even when he more or less adopted us. Every hug he ever gave me felt wrong. Every tender moment between us tainted by what he was: if not a murderer, than at least a man who didn't mourn his brother quite as hard as he should have.

The day he took the role that should have been my father's, he was downright giddy.

Now I wondered – did Deda believe Alexei killed my father, too? How could he believe that and still allow Alexei to come to power? His own son, murdered by his other son?

I didn't get the chance to ask Deda what he meant. Our conversation was over just as it really began. The doorknob turned, and opened with a swinging bang. Deda barely responded, fearing nothing, but I crawled back, jumping in my own skin. Alexei stood in the doorway, casting a long shadow over the lush carpet. His eyes landed on his father, narrowed. For one long, silent second, the two men just looked at each other. And then Alexei looked at me.

"It's over," he said. "Your little boyfriend is dead."

No. *No*. That wasn't true. Sinner wasn't dead. Alexei was a liar, an evil fucking toad whose lips were only made to spew lies, who couldn't tell the truth if he tried, who only lived to intimidate and scare and alienate and destroy –

If he was lying, then why was I sobbing? Why was I throwing myself into Deda's arms? Why was I thrashing on the sheets? Why was Alexei laughing, watching me writhe in agony

over the thought that Sinner was dead - because of me. Because I'd come into his life like a bundle of sweating dynamite, just waiting for a wrong move to explode. Because as long as I shared blood with Alexei Maximovich, nothing good would ever stay in my life. If I loved Sinner so much, I should have stayed the hell away from him.

Deda was speaking to Alexei in Russian, his words harsh, his arms around me, but I wasn't listening, I didn't care. They fought over my wails, my stomach dropping away, my body stabbed with grief. Of course Alexei would kill him. Only one of them could have lived if they met. And it wasn't Sinner standing in the doorway.

I heard the door closing with a slam. My sobs had stopped, but I gasped for each breath, eyes open, unable to blink, all too aware of my pounding heart, curling up like a dying flower in Deda's arms. He began to rock me, like I was a little girl having a nightmare. It wasn't enough. Many years ago, before I knew what pain was, it might have calmed me down. But now, it wasn't enough. Nothing would ever be enough. This wasn't how life was supposed to be. This wasn't what was supposed to happen when you fell in love.

Love shouldn't punish you.

Love shouldn't kill you.

I threw the pillow across the room, wishing it were made of glass, wanting to hear something that would match the constant shattering of my heart. I wanted every sound to be ugly, I wanted the whole world to go dark, a biblical plague descending on New England, from Connecticut to Maine. The whole world should be suffering.

And no one should suffer more than Alexei.

If I got out of there - if he let me out for some other reason than walking me to the hangman's rope - I would make sure he suffered. I didn't know how, but I could imagine. I lay back on the bed and imagined lots of ways to destroy my uncle. You think Rasputin had it bad? He and Uncle Alexei could share stories in hell. By the time I was through with him, at least in my mind, hell would be a relief.

Excerpt from *The Sweetest Mistake*, a dark billionaire romance.

"No, I don't," she said. "You don't understand, Finn! I couldn't be with anyone else after you! You ruined me, you broke me! You went and got *married*, you had a whole other *life*, and I was just here in Seymour, waiting for you like some pathetic little puppy. This whole thing was a mistake, Finn. We were a mistake, from the very beginning."

This was unreal. Gloria standing there, telling me she couldn't be with me because she loved me too much. It was so fucking *her*, I just wanted to laugh. Wanted to grab her, hold her while she thrashed and fought, until she ran out of steam and let me show her how wrong she was. Let me love her the way I always had, even when someone else was pretending to be her.

"My marriage with Sasha was the mistake," I said. "A big, ugly, disgusting mistake. You? Us? If that was a mistake, it was the sweetest fucking mistake anyone's ever made."

"Well, that doesn't make it right!"

"No," I said, stepping forward as she stepped back. "What makes it right is the way we work together. We fit, Gloria. No one ever fit with me like you. Don't tell me that I'm the one with the power. Maybe in the bedroom, but out here? In the real world? It's you. I ruined my life because I couldn't have you. You were the one who wanted to break up, remember?"

"But you're the one who wanted to stay broken up! You never came back for me, Finn."

"It's a two-way street," I said. "You never came after me, either."

"Yeah, because you went and made yourself a millionaire," she shouted. "What would I look like, crawling up to you after you made all your money? Just a fucking gold digger trying to make a buck. And that's not even the point! The point is that you're dangerous for me. You're...you're...you're the only drug that affects me. Everything else is gray, and you're technicolor. But it's not the same for you. I mean, Christ, Finn, that club...you *went* there, just on your own, and you kept going. You wouldn't have done that, not when we were together!"

"Are you fucking kidding me? Gloria, I went there because I was *lonely*. I just wanted you, but I couldn't have you. I was looking for anything to fill that hole. And you can't tell me you didn't like what you saw inside. I know it excited you, because you ran out of there and dry humped me until you came. So don't act like you can't understand why I went, why I kept going. It's your fault I am who I am, anyway."

The air went flat between us as my accusation hit. Gloria's lips parted, her chest heaving.

"What did you just say?"

"Well, it's true, isn't it? If it wasn't for you, I never would have become this...this monster," I said, the truth crushing down on my chest. I never meant to say these things to her - she wasn't really to blame, I was my own man, I could have said no.

But once she took my hands, showed me how to use them the way she wanted - I couldn't stop. She taught me how to hold her down, tie her up, choke her, gag her, do every goddamn awful thing that led me to Sasha. It was nothing but a high, watching a body writhe and undulate in ecstasy underneath you, a body belonging to a person who's given you everything. And Gloria was the first person to get me high. I'd been chasing that sensation ever since.

"You are who you are," she said, eyes narrowing. "All I did was show you how to do it."

"Do what?" I challenged, stepping closer. Her chin pointed up at me, her skin flushed. "Say it aloud."

"Don't try to change the subject," Gloria said, but her voice shook. I could smell her, a faint hint of shampoo, vanilla body lotion, masking the smell of *her*.

"This *is* the subject," I growled, feeling my control slipping. She was so close. Such a little rebel. Always asking for trouble, always begging to be punished. Being near her confused me, shook me, threw my whole world out of balance. I couldn't think straight, all I could do was watch her lips shake and imagine them wrapped around me. Especially when we fought like this - teeth bared, emotions high, adrenaline pumping. She could feel it, too. She kept licking her lips, kept sweeping her eyes down. Her nostrils flared. "You're saying you don't trust me. Don't trust yourself around me. And you shouldn't trust yourself around me."

Her eyes widened, pupils shaking slightly as her breath hitched.

"Because you showed me how to touch you," I said, stepping forward once more. She leaned back but didn't move her feet. "You turned me into your perfect Dom. You gave me this power, and now you don't get to take it away. You ruined me. You're the reason I had to settle for some poor substitute. You're the one who left."

I reached forward, finding the smooth tilt of her jaw, loosely wrapping one hand around her neck, my thumb on the hollow under her chin. She gasped, her eyes closing, body going still. I leaned in, blood rushing to my cock, knowing she was going to yield to me. Knowing that she would surrender. She'd dug this hole herself, and now I was going to bury both of us in it. I put my lips to her ear.

"Now, you're gonna stop playing these stupid fucking games," I whispered, feeling her pulse accelerate. "And let me fuck you the way you deserve to be fucked. The way you've been begging to be fucked, ever since you saw me again. Later, we can talk about who belongs to who. But right now..."

As I spoke, I slowly increased my grip on her neck, my other hand wrapping around her, pulling her close so she could feel my heat. She was shaking in my grasp, whimpering, her legs slowly spreading out of some long-instilled instinct.

"...right now, I own every inch of you. It's only fair, Gloria. You get my whole fucking life, but right now? I get your body. Be a good girl and admit it. Tell me. Whose body is this?"

She was silent. I wasn't holding her hard enough that she couldn't speak, and I could hear her breathing fast and erratic. Every second of silence that passed drove me deeper and deeper into my anger, into my need to possess her.

“Yours,” she finally gasped, wrapping her arms around me at the same time. “Yours...Master.”

“Good girl,” I smiled against her ear. A knock on the door jarred me, made me clutch her tighter. “Who’s that?”

“Thai food,” she said, voice shaking. I chuckled, letting her feel the warmth of my breath swirling in her ear.

“I’ll take care of that,” I promised. “In the meantime, you’re going to take off your clothes, get on your bed, and spread your legs. You’ve been a terrible little tease, and you need to make up for it. You’re going to give Master everything he wants. *Everything*.”

I released her so that I could watch her response, the way her eyes glazed over as she nodded.

“Yes, Master,” she muttered. “Everything.”

She began to turn away, to lead me to her bedroom, but I stopped her, tugging on her hand.

“And you’re wearing the collar,” I said. She looked back at me, eyes coming to life again, flashing her refusal before her lips could form the word *no*. I grabbed her by the hair, pulling her back towards me, reminding her how much stronger I was. “Don’t you *dare* say no to me. Not now, not ever again. This is what you fucking wanted, and this is what you’re getting. You’re wearing the fucking collar. Your neck is mine, and I want to see my collar wrapped around it.”

She moaned as the pain of my hand tugging at her hair ignited inside her, driving her to squirm against me.

“Yes, Sir,” she panted. “Anything you want, Master. I’m yours.”

“You’re goddamn right you are,” I said, biting gently at her ear, slowly releasing her. “And I’m going to make sure you never forget that, ever again.”

Excerpts from *Kitten*, a dark mafia romance.

Wolf

It’s always nice to be reminded that the world can still throw you a surprise or two. Especially when that surprise comes in such a pretty little package.

She barely made it to me. It was a testament to my chain of security; by then, it was common knowledge that she was a wanted young woman, and harboring her might be against the Family’s best interests. But when Maxxie came to me with her name on his lips, I waved to let her in.

Frankly, I was too curious to deny her. Not so curious about why she'd come to me. That much was clear. I hated Blade, and he hated me. If anyone was going to help her, it would be the Family.

What I was curious about reflected a lot poorer on me. I was curious about why she did it. And I was curious about what she'd offer in exchange for protection.

The minute she walked into the room, I felt everything begin to spin out. The most important thing in my life is control. But looking at her, the way she shimmied through the door, lavender eyes wide as she looked up at Maxxie and his scowling face, I started playing a tug-of-war I knew I'd lose.

She'd dyed her hair, and cut it - it was shoulder-length, and done in that wild, faded rainbow style that was so popular among girls her age. Blues and purples and pinks, one color blending into the next. It made her pale skin look rosy. Her face looked thin, her eyes haunted. She wore short and a t-shirt, and a backpack. She looked just like a teenage runaway.

Her eyes met mine and she stopped walking, stopped breathing. I watched her parted lips shake just slightly as her breath stopped in her throat. I quickly gestured to the chair across from my desk, and she took it, her knees leaning together towards the right. I wasn't sure if it was the act of sitting down or some deep reserve of inner power, but she seemed to gain confidence as she sat down. She straightened her back, squared her shoulders, and looked me in the eye.

"Maddy McMullins," I said, keeping all emotion out of my voice. Masking my emotions is second nature, a skill trained into me from a young age. It's a necessary trait of a good Boss.

"Powell," she corrected flatly, maintaining eye contact. I liked that. Not just because it gave me a chance to enjoy her violet eyes, but also because it showed something of her spirit. I'd seen men twice her size and wealthier than she could imagine cower in the very seat she occupied.

"Alright," I said. "Maddy Powell. I'd say it's a pleasure to see you, but I have reason to suspect this isn't a social visit. You're in trouble."

Best to get to the heart of things. Little Ms. Powell came to me for a reason - because she thought I could help her. Well, maybe I could. In fact, I knew for sure that I *could* help her. The question was whether or not I *would*.

"Yes," she said, nodding. "I'm in trouble. I'm on the Red Rock Riders' short list, and I need protection."

“Last time I saw you, you had black hair,” I observed, gesturing to the shoulder-length rainbow she currently wore on her head. “I assume this is your idea of a disguise?”

She nodded again, and reflexively pulled at a purple strand, twirling it around a finger.

“You don’t think the rainbow draws some attention?” I asked.

“That’s kind of the idea,” she said, flipping that lock of hair back. “Why would someone in hiding make such a bold choice? Besides that, this style is very *in* right now. There are a couple thousand skinny girls with rainbow hair in L.A. at the moment. I blend right in.”

So she did. It was a good idea. And it gave me the impression that Blade hadn’t been killed in the spur of the moment, but that she’d been planning to shoot him for some time. Interesting.

“So, you’re in trouble,” I said. “And you need my help. What, exactly, do you want me to do for you?”

“Anything,” she said, sighing the word out. “I’m not sure where I’ll be safe, if anywhere. I’d like to get on a plane to France. But I don’t have any money. I don’t have a passport. They’ll be looking for me all over. I’ll be honest with you, Mr. Amari...”

“Wolf,” I said. “Please, call me Wolf.”

“Wolf,” she said, as though tasting the word, not sure if it was poison. My cock twitched with the way her lips circled to form the sound. “To be honest, I’m not sure where to go from here. I thought that perhaps, since you had such animosity with Blade, and if I could promise you a return on your investment...”

A return on my investment? God, I liked her. She was five feet of clever, in a package so sweetly sexy that my mind wanted to go everywhere it shouldn’t when I looked at her.

“What kind of return are we talking, Maddy?”

Already, I could see her wearing my collar. I could hear her voice calling me *Sir*. I could feel her hair under my palm as I stroked it...

Fuck. Not since Jackie had I had such an instant desire to possess a woman. This would need to be handled delicately - for both our sakes.

“Information,” she said. “I can feed you information. About the club. I have a friend on the inside, still, and...”

She was lying. I could tell in the way she broke eye contact for the first time. She was lying through her teeth. She didn’t know anything. I knew Blade McMullins; he didn’t respect

women enough for Maddy to know a goddamn thing. And she had no friends on the inside. Maybe on the periphery, but not on the inside. If she had a friend on the inside, she wouldn't be sitting in front of me.

"That's interesting," I said. "What kind of information do you have for me, Maddy?"

She faltered, meeting my eyes for a moment before they flicked away again.

"Structural information," she said. "Ranks. Gossip. Who hates who. That sort of thing."

"I see," I said, continuing to play along. "And you think this information would be valuable enough to me that I would take on the risk of helping you? Sheltering you?"

"I know it would be," she said. "The best way to dismantle anything is from the inside. If you can turn the brothers against each other by attacking their weak points, you'll never have to worry about them again."

She was good. Very good. Not good enough, but I respected her effort nonetheless.

"I don't think you're telling me the truth, Maddy," I said finally, putting my hands down on the desk. "I'm not at all sure that you have any information to give me. At least, no *true* information."

"Why?" she asked. She *demand*ed. "Why don't you believe me?"

A worse liar might have immediately tried to convince me I was wrong. She challenged me rather than defending herself.

"For one thing, any information you might have had before killing Blade is useless now. The club you're running from is not the same club you knew. It's different, a completely different animal. Furthermore, you're a young girl. Blade was a misogynist. I'd be surprised if you stepped foot in their headquarters since your father died.

And you don't have any friends on the inside. No one would risk their lives for the girl who killed Blade unless they were in love with you. And as beautiful and enchanting as you are, my pet, you've somehow managed to avoid a relationship with any of the brothers. Trust me, I would know. We've been keeping tabs on the Riders for years. We wouldn't have missed anything as juicy as Blade's stepdaughter conducting an affair with one of his men."

It just slipped out. *My pet*. Like the label already belonged to her. She didn't seem to notice, but I did. It set off alarms in my chest that I promptly ignored. Yes. She could be the one. It had been long enough. This time, I would do it right.

Maddy stared at me, her mind very clearly working hard behind her violet eyes. Formulating a defense, a set of lies that might persuade me. I put my hand up before she could open her lips and say anything more.

“But I have another idea for a ‘return on my investment’,” I said, quoting her. “I’ll give you complete protection. You’ll have security on you at all times. You’ll be hidden where the Riders could never find you.”

She leaned forward, clearly trying to fight the hope my words instilled in her chest. Preparing herself for disappointment.

“And in return?” she asked softly.

“I have very few needs, Maddy,” I said. “And even fewer desires. But I have been looking for someone to fill a certain role in my life.”

I watched her face fall and her eyes darken. Whatever she suspected, I didn’t think she could imagine the truth.

“You want me to be a whore,” she said flatly. Putting words in my mouth. Leaning back in her chair, defeated, closing her eyes.

“No,” I said. “Not quite. More of a companion. Someone to serve my needs - within reason.”

She rubbed her temples.

“Within reason?” she mumbled.

“Within reason,” I repeated, nodding although she couldn’t see me. “Maddy, open your eyes.”

She did, displaying a natural submissiveness that was both alluring and surprising. She was fighting herself, hard. I saw it in the sparks she sent my way, the curl of her lips.

“One year, Maddy,” I said. “And then I’ll put you on that plane to France. Though I urge you to consider Italy, instead. Better wine, less stinky cheese.”

She looked at me. The struggle in her eyes continued. And good as I was at reading people, I honestly didn’t know which way she’d turn. I could only hope - and, much like the young woman before me, I was preparing myself for disappointment.

Maddy

I knew, from the second I walked into that room, that he wouldn't be interested in any information I could give him.

Seeing him again after so many years was overwhelming. The last time I saw Wolf, I was burying my father. Even then, I remember, he'd struck me. At 14, I barely knew what a man was supposed to look like, or what you would do with a man whose looks you liked. But I remembered him like the single Technicolor object in a black-and-white world. His black hair, slightly curled, coiffed with gel. His black eyes. The silhouette he cut in a tight-fitting suit, shoes shiny and expensive. His watch glinting sunlight.

I remembered how ashamed I was, that he took my breath away on the day of my father's funeral. He didn't stay for the wake. But before he left in a long line of black cars, he made eye contact with me and nodded. It was a moment I'll admit to replaying in my head many times since then. On a sunny day, if I was letting my mind idle, staring out the window, waiting for something to happen in the desert - it would just slip across my mind's eye, and I'd feel a sadness inside me that wasn't wholly explained by my father's death.

If I could go back in time and tell my 14-year-old self about this, she wouldn't know whether to cry from happiness or horror. *That man? He wants me?*

Then again, that's the same exact fucking shit that got me into trouble with Blade in the first place. The wanting. The stupid little girl in my mind that wanted to yield to a powerful man, who felt *treasured* when she was being seduced, who felt all that sick, shameful pleasure in being wanted. The girl who eagerly opened her legs before anyone told her she'd never be able to close them again. I guess I couldn't kill that girl, after all, because sitting there in Wolf's office, under his black-eyed stare, I felt a familiar softening in my heart - *wouldn't it be nice to be kept, taken care of, adored?*

That's how men get you. They convince you they'll keep you. Take care of you. Adore you. But all they want to do is rob you blind and leave you broken. I could get through this if I remembered that. What Wolf was asking was outlandish. I would be going from the frying pan to the fryer. Jumping from one jail cell to another. Giving another dragon the keys to the castle.

But it wouldn't be my first time compromising my flesh. And this time, I would actually be getting something I needed out of it.

This time, I had a say in it.

This time, I could say *no*. I could say *no* and run. I'd have to stay on the run for a long, long time; but I could do it. I had friends who'd help me, if they could. Living my whole life through a computer screen had some benefits; I knew people from Shanghai to Seattle. No one who would float me enough money to leave the country, but people who'd at least let me crash with them if I needed to.

The thought of running, though, made me so tired. Killing Blade had taken six years of pent-up rage energy. I didn't have any left. I was exhausted; I just wanted to stay somewhere. Anywhere. Even in this man's dark and feral den.

"Alright," I said, watching his eyes for a reaction. They showed nothing. Somehow, I knew they wouldn't. A man like Wolf didn't wear his emotions on his sleeve. Eyes are the windows to the soul, and I suspected Wolf's soul was as empty and dark as the gaze he cast over me.

"You accept?"

I nodded.

"Excellent," Wolf said, studying me. "I suppose you have a lot of questions?"

I didn't. What was there to ask? He wanted me to be his live-in fuck-slave. I shook my head. I didn't want to talk about it. Just let him do it, and leave me alone. Surprise finally showed in his stoic eyes.

"Really?" He murmured. "That's disappointing. You seem too clever to lack curiosity."

"What's there to be curious about," I said flatly. "You want me to fuck you in exchange for my safety."

His lips twitched, curling ever so slightly at the corners. He was so handsome when he smiled. It wouldn't be so bad, really. He was better looking than Blade, and...

"That's not quite true," he said. "I'm certainly interested in *fucking* you, Maddy."

He rolled the dirty word from his tongue like a promise, and I felt my stomach clench in a way that wasn't entirely unpleasant.

"But I'm not going to do anything to you until you ask for it," he said. "I'm not going to lay a finger on you, make no flesh-to-flesh contact at all, until you beg for it."

"What?" I said, surprised. He couldn't possibly mean that, could he? What kind of man would say something like that and mean it?

“I may use other...tools...to inspire you in your training as a pet,” Wolf went on, not really answering my question. “But I don’t aim to take anything. Not when you’ll eventually be giving it to me.”

“You’re insane,” I said, laughing a bit, shaking my head. A pet? The phrase gave me pause, but first things first. “Why on earth would I ever *ask* you to fuck me?”

Wolf’s lips twitched again.

“For starters, kitten, we need to establish the proper mode of communication,” he said, once more ignoring my question. “You’ll refer to me as Sir.”

I fought the urge to roll my eyes. Geeze. I already said I’d do it, why did he have to make all these theatrics out of a simple, mutually beneficial arrangement? Wasn’t it enough that I gave him my body - did I need to cater to his ego, too? And this kitten business - calling me a pet...I didn’t get it.

“Try it on for size, kitten,” he said. It was weird, hearing him call me *kitten*. But I have to admit, too, that it was a bit cute. I didn’t mind it as much as you might think. It was a little sweet, really. Of course, I reprimanded myself for thinking those things; I wasn’t his fucking pet, no matter what I agreed to, no matter how I acted to appease him. I didn’t kill one possessive rapist just to end up in the arms of another. Let him think whatever he wanted. I was free now, and whatever I did for him was my choice, my decision.

“Sir?” I said. “Okay, Sir.”

“Good,” Wolf leaned back, eyes narrowing. “And, as you’ve presumed, I’ll be referring to you as kitten, or my pet.”

“This isn’t some bestiality thing, is it?” I asked. “You’re not going to make me pretend to be a cat?”

His eyes brightened for a moment, like he was amused. He shifted, curling a finger under his chin, thumb on his jaw.

“Not quite,” he said. “Though you will be wearing a collar.”

“A collar?” Panic ignited in my breast. Did he mean a tracking collar? So I couldn’t run away? So I couldn’t get away, if I needed to, if I wanted to...

“A token of our agreement,” he said. “A symbol of your trust in me.”

“Trust in you?” Now I was supposed to trust him, too? Call him Sir, let him collar me, *trust* him?

“You should really try to get in the habit of calling me Sir,” he said casually. “And yes, trust. This doesn’t work without trust. You trust my ability to keep you safe from the Red Rock Riders?”

I nodded slowly. I *did* trust him in that capacity, at least.

“And do you trust me when I say I won’t touch you until you’re ready for me to touch you? Not with my skin on your skin, at least.”

Now, that I didn’t trust at all. I didn’t think for a single second that I’d leave his house untouched. He might try to hold onto this insane chivalry - or whatever it was - for a night, two nights, maybe even a week. But he was a man, and he would cave to his body’s needs. He would come after me long before I came after *him*.

And speaking of coming, I promised myself that this time, I wouldn’t.

“I see,” Wolf said, not needing me to answer his question. “Well, you’ll learn. I promise, kitten. You’ll learn.”

“Alright, Sir,” I said. He leaned forward quite suddenly, grabbing a slip of paper and scribbling something across it.

“Give this to the man outside my door,” he said, slipping the paper across the desk to me. “He’ll find you an escort to my house. Once you’re there, show the note to Teresa, and she’ll show you to your room. You’ll join me for dinner tonight at 6. I’ll have someone come by with the outfit I’d like you to wear to dinner. Now, if you don’t mind, I’m a busy man. We’ll discuss this more over dinner.”

And just like that, it was all over. Well, the conversation at least. And my wondering. My fear that he would refuse me. I was under Ciro “Wolf” Amari’s protection.

And all it cost me was my body - something that hadn’t been mine for six years, anyway.

Wolf

I wasn't lying about being a busy man. But I could have given her a little more of my time. I didn't want to, because I needed that time to rage against myself.

What the *hell* was I doing?

As if I didn't fucking know. I was creating Jackie 2.0. All over again. For a Dom, I sure did have a big masochistic streak.

I didn't need Maddy. I wasn't dying of loneliness. I had no shortage of girls willing to let me use their bodies however I desired. What's more, I had no shortage of girls who'd kill to be in Maddy's place. All their needs taken care of, along with a steady stream of orgasms - for the low, low price of wearing my collar.

But no. I had to go and get a girl like Maddy. Who had no idea what she was in for. Who didn't want it. Who was dangerous to even be around. Who could put my Family at risk. Who looked at me like I was already forcing her legs open and taking whatever I wanted.

Of course I had to have *her*. I always did like a challenge.

But after Jackie, I'd promised myself to leave the challenges alone. They were more trouble than they were worth. The love a Master like me will feel for a pet like that isn't worth the heartbreak that comes with it. Those are the kittens you tame, just to watch them purr for someone else. You sow the seeds to create a perfect Submissive, and then someone else reaps the harvest. You fall in love with those girls, and they find love in someone else's bed.

Easy girls can leave you, and it doesn't matter. You didn't have to put so much effort and care and time into it. They come and go with the same blinking quickness, almost as though they were never there at all.

Jackie hadn't lived in my house for two years, and she still took up space there.

Was I just trying to replace her? Turn little Maddy into another version of her? Was I *that* pathetic?

No. No; it wasn't that. I knew myself well enough to know it wasn't that. Despite the violence of my attraction to both of them, they couldn't be more different. Jackie was quiet from the start, meek and frightened in ways that Maddy wasn't. Jackie wouldn't look me in the eyes for weeks. It took a month for her to challenge me on anything. That was the problem with

Jackie. It wasn't that she was hard to coax into my arms. She folded so easily, bent to my will almost before I could ask her to.

Where was the virtue of a pet with no mind of her own? What kind of man wants a woman who agrees with everything he says? Too afraid to speak against him, too frightened to have her own opinion. Jackie was someone's perfect kitten, but not mine. I couldn't love her until she trusted me enough to fight me.

But, oh, when she finally did - when she finally became the woman I knew she could be - it was the kind of love that steamrolled me.

Would she have left me if she was still that meek, frightened little girl? Would she have dared to walk out on me? Hard to say, but I didn't regret anything - if she left because I gave her the power to leave, I wouldn't have gone back in time and taken it away.

So Maddy wasn't replacing Jackie.

Maddy was my way of testing the reverse. I could already tell she would fight me on everything, with everything she had.

After all, this was the girl who shot Blade McMullins, President of the Death Valley Riders.

That thought made me smile, alone in my big office overlooking the city. I leaned back in my office chair, fingers on my lips. I wanted to know why she did it. I wanted to know what made Maddy tick. I wanted to know how far I could push her before I hit brick. And I wanted to know how hard she'd push back.

This kitten had claws.