
Chapter 1

CORPUS ROCK, *New Mexico*

Lynnie

My heart skipped a beat. The Devil was at my front door. And not a minute too soon.

Once upon a time, I'd thought there was nothing more terrifying than my mother's new husband. But I'd been wrong, Alfie wasn't shit compared to him. Reaper. The leader of the Devil's Riders. The most dangerous man who ever wore leather and rode a motorcycle.

The man I was gambling my entire future on.

The sound of screeching tailpipes alerted me to their arrival. Drying my hands on the towel hanging through the door handle of the fridge, I hightailed it to the kitchen window. Peeking out the pale, faded curtain, I watched the men in black leather cuts, bank their bikes along the length of our dirt driveway. A plume of dust swirled around their

powerful bodies as they dismounted their tricked-out Harleys.

The men spoke in deep baritones as they unfastened their helmets and slung them around the handles of their beloved metal beasts. Raising my hand, I sheltered my eyes from their twinkling brightness and continued to watch for him. My would-be savior.

Pain greeted me as my fingers grazed my swollen brow. I'd momentarily forgotten about my black eye. It wasn't hard to do. I was sporting bruises more often than not these days. Bruises that came courtesy of my stepfather, Alfie. Rare was the occasion that the man's children, or his wives, weren't some shade of black or blue. After all, Alfie didn't ask for what he wanted. He showed you. With his fists. And he wasn't stingy with the lessons.

I, more than any of the other women, irritated the sullen man. As the daughter of a "worldly woman", Alfie believed me to be inherently sinful. Wicked. Prideful. Probably because I was. Not in the eyes of the secular world, mind you. To them, I would have been considered a saint. But in the eyes of my mother's pompous, righteous, zealot of a husband, I was nothing short of Jezebel herself.

My mother was Alfie's fifth wife. That's right. Lucky number five. A fact that is exactly as exciting and honorable as it sounds. I was the twenty-ninth child of a fifth wife. Strike that. The twenty-ninth child of a fifth wife who wasn't even biologically his. Yup. I was pretty much as useful to the man as tits on a bull and he never let me forget it.

But that all changed the year I turned fifteen. Two things happened to alter my world forever that year. Alfie's first wife passed away and I started to develop breasts. Suddenly, I had my stepfather's attention. And that had never been a goal of mine.

The pig got it into his head that I needed to be his sixth

wife. The replacement for the woman who'd born him twelve children, taking what would have been his thirtieth child with her to the grave.

The advancements started small. Standing too close. A hand grazing my lower back. His eyes slowly trailing across my burgeoning figure. I'd thought I was crazy at first. The man who'd raised me since I was ten, couldn't be doing what I thought he was doing. Even in our circle of people it would've been considered taboo.

But Alfie was a crafty man and the head of our congregation. It didn't take much convincing to get our people to believe his lies. One Sunday service, he'd declared he'd had a dream. His dead wife Aziel had come to him and spoken of a girl. A young girl. She was not born of him, but was his, and would go on to be his. One with dark hair, honey-colored eyes, and worldly ways.

I'd nearly choked when I'd heard of Aziel's spectral visit and what it all meant. Alfie was laying the groundwork to become my husband. A real shock to the man's eldest son, Benton, whom I'd been betrothed to the year I'd turned fourteen.

To her credit, my mother had been just as horrified by the news as me. Never one to show a spine, she'd surprisingly grown one and denied her husband her only child. In response, Alfie had beaten her.

After a month's long fast and just as many days spent on her knees in our church in prayer, Alfie had broken her spirit and will to fight the union. It was decided. My stepfather and I would be married shortly after I turned eighteen.

But no amount of numerology, beatings, fasting, or prayer, was going to make me agree to such an ungodly union. True, I hated the man's son, my first intended. But the father, him, I despised! I'd sooner slit my own wrists and risk eternal damnation than marry the likes of Alfie Barlow!

That was where the bikers came in. The Devil's Riders had been doing business with Alfie for three years now. The kind that happened at night, tucked away in old barns where no one could see them. My congregation, God's Settlers, was buying the MC's guns. We were stockpiling for Armageddon. Apparently, we were going to fight the devil with multiple crates full of semi-automatics and a mountain of man-made bullets.

I'd stumbled upon one of their secret meetings a few months back when I'd accidentally left behind a lit lantern after milking the cows before bed. There was no electricity in our barn, and we used kerosene lamps to light our way after dark. If left unattended, those lamps could be dangerous. Some had even burned down several of our outbuildings a few years back.

That was the night when I first met him. The giant of a man was talking with Alfie. Bent over an open wooden crate, he was holding a large black gun and showing my stepfather how to properly load it.

Reaper Jameson. I'd heard Alfie mention his name to Benton when he'd thought I wasn't listening. But women were always listening. Especially when a man like Reaper was mentioned. Impossibly tall. Built as strong as our stallion. With eyes so blue and hard they looked like they could have been fashioned from the very steel he'd rode in on.

As soon as our gazes met, I'd recognized that flame of need in his. I might be sheltered from the outside world, but I'd seen that look before. It was in the eyes of the men within our community whenever a pretty, young girl came of age. Sometimes before.

And while it turned my stomach when my fellow male congregants looked at me like that, Reaper, well, he was different. With him, I liked it. Craved it even.

A gush of wetness coated my panties when Reaper

looked at me. His nostrils flared and he'd taken an unconscious step in my direction. I swear he could scent my arousal. Just like our stallion did the mares when they were in heat. And I could feel his. Even from across the poorly lit room.

The spell we'd both been under had broken when Alfie had bellowed for me to "get out" of the barn. But all it had taken was one look and I'd known that Reaper was my salvation. And to earn it, I was willing to do anything. Give anything. So that was exactly my plan. Offer the leader of the Devil's Riders MC everything I had—my innocence. And in return, all I wanted was freedom. For my mother, and for myself.

The hardened group of men glanced around the vacant yard now. It was quiet. Too quiet. Only a few hens and a beaten old rooster were visible, hunting around the burnt-out lot for fat bugs and scraps of the remaining feed from breakfast.

Alfie was buying some livestock down at the Tanner farm across town. My mother had gone with him so she could help make lunches with the other women. No one else was on the homestead but me.

Alfie's other wives lived in the center of the compound about a mile down the road. Our farmhouse was isolated and much farther out than the rest of the congregants. It had been purchased when Alfie had married my mother and didn't have the room to house her with the rest of his harem. That's why my stepfather did his business with the MC here. It was so secluded and far removed from the rest of the compound that he could keep his dirty little dealings secret. That seclusion meant that I was alone with the bikers. Alone with Reaper.

Knowing time was of the essence, I straightened my plain, worn, blue dress and headed to the door to greet him.

At the last moment, I decided to pull my hair out of the severe bun I was wearing. The dark, thick strands fell around my face in a glossy curtain that I knew would be much more flattering than the old-fashioned styles we were forced to wear.

Taking a deep breath, I heard the confident knock and paused to make it appear as though I wasn't waiting directly behind the door. Steeling my spine, I released the pent-up air from my lungs and reached shakily for the handle.