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## Chapter 1

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**L**illy stretched as she awoke in the predawn hours. Hopping from the bed she tugged on a pair of sweats, grabbed a hoodie and tied it around her waist. She ran a hand through her short blonde hair. She'd chopped it off because it was easier to take care of this way. She'd always loved her long hair. Maybe she'd grow it back now that she had secure accommodations again.

She crept toward the door, she didn't sleep well, she hadn't in a long time but she'd had enough of this room. She didn't have a beef with any of these bikers except that they treated women like they were porcelain. She didn't consider herself fragile and didn't like being kept under lock and key even if it was for her protection. Were they all so degenerate they couldn't be trusted with a woman? She wasn't worried. If they stepped out of line, she'd put them in their place. But she made sure the handle on the door was locked before she closed it. She could fend for herself but she wouldn't leave Sparrow vulnerable, that girl had been through enough.

The hall and rec room of the club were deserted as she quietly made her way to the front door. She knew there would

be a guard on the porch. Even though she'd spent most of her time in her room, she was observant. Almost certainly Arsenic was on duty. He liked the early morning quiet. She didn't analyze why her heart quickened at the thought of seeing him. The club was dimly lit so when she opened the door and stepped into the night it only took her eyes a moment to adjust.

"What the fuck you doing?" a familiar voice asked.

She zeroed in on the tip of a lit cigarette. "I'm tired of being caged like an animal."

The poor swing creaked as he stood. "It's for your protection."

"What? You going to attack me because I flash a little arm?" She did an exaggerated wave in front of him.

Arsenic snickered. "I'm good, but not everybody has my control. Women are scarce, an arm might do it for some." He gestured to the space next to him on the swing as he took his seat.

"Then they are the ones who should be locked up." Ignoring his offer, she slid into a rocker next to the swing and held out her hand. "You going to share?"

"Share?" The low timbre of his voice shimmied down her spine.

"A cig please."

"Oh, you trying to be a little rebel." He handed over a cigarette and lighter. "Don't choke." Their hands touched and she jumped. Even in the low light, she saw him grimace and knew he thought it was fear that had her on edge but she didn't fear him.

Lilly snorted. "Not likely." She flipped the lighter and drew deeply on the cig. A mini high rushed through her body as she blew the smoke out her nose. She stared into the darkness enjoying the quiet. Some people thought monsters came out at

night. Lilly knew that monsters were always out, they were just braver in the dark.

“Why are you up so early?” he asked.

Lilly shrugged. She wasn’t in the mood to explain that since the virus took her mother and grandfather, she’d been unable to sleep through the night so she blamed it on her roommate. “Sparrow tosses and turns a lot.”

He nodded. “Reliving the trauma.”

“Everyone has trauma nowadays. Some deal with it better than others.” Everyone had family and friends who had died from the virus. Then there was the vaccine, it was more deadly than the virus. But it didn’t just kill you, it turned you into a crazed, bloodthirsty monster before it slowly sucked the life from you. If you were one of the few fortunate enough to survive it all you had to navigate a world controlled by the dregs of society. Survival had even turned good people into monsters. Sparrow had found that out firsthand. She’d been captured by some nasty club and suffered horrible abuse. Compared to Sparrow, Lilly had been lucky. Now, they were both lucky to have found a group of decent people. The crew of the Southern Quest Motorcycle Club were protective, a bit controlling but they genuinely seemed to care about people and their community.

“How are you?” Arsenic asked. Everyone asked that and she was kinda tired of it but she understood their concern.

“Been better.” She chuckled. “Been a lot worse though.” He didn’t comment but she could feel his gaze studying her. “Killing Nick threw me for a minute. Not because he didn’t deserve it but because I took a life. I’ve come to terms with it now. In this world, sometimes you have to kill. My only regret is that I didn’t kill him sooner.” Nick had drugged and kidnapped her. He had forced her to accompany him to his uncle’s farm and pretend to be his wife in every sense of the word. Worst of all, she suspected

he'd killed her brother but she couldn't prove it. Nick had deserved a worse death than he received. Sometimes, she still felt her knife sinking into his flesh and his warm blood pouring out onto her but she'd saved herself and Amelia. Amelia, who was now Jawbone's ol' lady, had spent a short time at that farm too. Nick had harassed Amelia and when she tried to leave, he'd accosted her and intended to rape her. Even through the haze of a sedative, Lilly couldn't allow Nick to hurt anyone else.

"True. The asswipe deserved it and a lot more. Wish we would have gotten there sooner. Me and Jawbone would have made a wishbone outta him."

She frowned and nodded. "He did deserve worse. I don't regret it but I've never killed a human before not unless you count the rabid people. I had to kill them."

Arsenic arched a brow. "You shot some Crazies?"

"Crazies? Is that what you all call 'em?" she asked.

"Yeah." He snorted. "They were crazy mf'ers," he said as he scanned their surroundings with his night vision binoculars.

She nodded. "Shot, stabbed or beat to death. Whatever got the job done," she said with a shrug.

"Okay, Princess," Arsenic replied in a mocking tone.

She bristled. Just because she was thin everyone always assumed she needed protection. "I'm not helpless. Far from it actually."

He snorted then blew smoke in her direction. "Where is that mousey little girl I rescued?"

Lilly tapped the ash on her cig before taking a long drag. "I woke up out of that nightmare. But you didn't rescue me. I killed the big bad."

Arsenic lit a small candle, which bathed them in a soft glow. "You did indeed. Then you collapsed and I rode in."

A wide grin split Arsenic's face reminding her how gorgeous he was. Thankfully, it was dark enough her reaction

to the alpha male wasn't obvious. She glanced away before muttering, "I would have been fine."

"Yeah. Until that next group rode in and slaughtered Nick's uncle and the rest of that group," Arsenic reminded her.

Lilly gasped as those words slammed into her. In her head, she knew she couldn't have made any difference if she'd been there. Without weapons, she couldn't have saved them. Hell! She had failed to save her own brother. She remembered the people she left behind and their horrible fate at the hands of those ruthless thugs. At least Arsenic's club eliminated the murdering bastards.

"Sorry." His big, warm hand grasped her bare arm. "That was low."

A shiver raced down her spine straight to her core as his rough thumb traced the underside of her arm. His touch was electric until his grip tightened.

He lifted the candle and his head bowed over her arm. "Track marks?" he asked incredulously.

Lilly tugged her arm but his grip tightened. She'd made the mistake of not wearing the hoodie. She thought the darkness would be her cover.

"You're an addict?" he accused.

"No!" she denied vehemently.

His thumb ran along her arm. "Don't lie to me."

Yanking her arm free she huddled in her seat. "It's not what you think."

Arsenic's lips thinned as he studied her. "Then what is it?"

Lilly sighed. "Nick used some kind of sedative to keep me compliant. He knew he couldn't control me without it."

"He was a good-sized dude and you're a lightweight. I doubt he needed drugs," Arsenic scoffed skeptically.

"I'm stronger than I look." Lilly lunged to her feet and

tugged the hoodie over her head. She wasn't lying but she couldn't expect him to believe her.

Standing, Arsenic grabbed her by the back of the hood. "We aren't done yet."

Lilly spun to the side and kicked him in the stomach putting him back in his seat. "I think we are." She turned and managed two steps before he was on her. His large body pressed her to the wall. Arms, legs, and head all pinned. She didn't have any options to free herself. Her heart pounded and she shivered, uncertain if she wanted to be free of his powerful embrace.

His fingers laced in her short hair and he angled her head until she met his fiery gaze. "Do you have a drug problem?"

"No. Until he captured me, I'd never touched any drug," she replied honestly.

His eyes narrowed as he considered her words. "Good!" He shifted his hard, muscled body against her and she stiffened in his arms. Part of her wanted to thrust her hips back into his groin, the other part wanted to rack him and break his controlling hold. "Now, obviously by that kick you delivered to my stomach, you've had some training but most of the guys here would take you out in a heartbeat. We're bigger, stronger and all trained." His groin pressed against her backside. "If you hadn't been terrorized by that loser, I'd have you over my knee right now."

She rolled her eyes. She knew she couldn't handle a trained man in hand to hand but her skills could buy her some time. "Am I supposed to be scared?" she asked in a breathy voice.

"No." His warm breath caressed her cheek playing havoc with her nerves. "Just show some respect. We're here to protect you and the others."

"How am I supposed to do that? On my knees?" She batted her eyes. A shiver raced down her spine but it wasn't

from fear. “Are you going to force me?” She lowered her head feigning submission.

Immediately Arsenic loosened his grip. “Fuck no. I don’t force—”

Moving quickly, she worked her arm loose and grabbed him by the balls. She didn’t squeeze she just wanted him to know, she had him. Their gazes locked and she felt his shaft lengthen against her wrist but she didn’t flinch. “I appreciate your help but I’m not a damsel in distress. I can handle myself.” Lilly unlocked her fingers and inched away from him unsure of his reaction.

With a deep chuckle, Arsenic stepped back but not far enough for her to get around him. His hazel eyes gleamed with amusement. “The young lady I helped out a few days ago was sweet.” A sexy grin tugged at his lips as his gaze raked her form. “This fiery chick is even better. You want to play games then I’m all in.”

Lilly held his gaze refusing to budge. Grabbing him like that had set off a myriad of emotions inside her and she struggled not to let them show. A light switched on in the club rec room and Arsenic stepped back. Hastily she moved to the door.

“Round one to you but in round two, I might just put you on your back, little girl.”

She swallowed hard as her pussy pulsed with a need she knew Arsenic could sate. Lilly realized she shouldn’t rush into anything but her body had other ideas. She hesitated and looked over her shoulder. “Give it your best shot,” she taunted then scurried inside. She saw Ryatt, the club President, out of the corner of her eye but kept moving before he could say anything.

Back at her room, she unlocked the door and snuck inside. Sparrow was still asleep. Lilly pulled the hoodie off, threw it on the floor and curled up in a ball on the couch. She managed

to arouse something in the reserved, Arsenic. There was fire under that calm exterior. He wasn't immune to her. That should probably scare her because she definitely wasn't immune to him.

Nibbling her lip, she closed her eyes as images of the big biker as he hovered over her filled her head. Tall with lean muscle coiled tight like a panther ready to pounce, he exuded strength. Pressed against him she'd felt the leashed power and she'd wanted to provoke him. Something about the big man had appealed to her from the moment she saw him. He was gorgeous, but it was more than that. He had a calm, gentle and controlled demeanor which appealed to something in her. His short, dark hair screamed military but his goatee wasn't regulation. Most of the bikers wore jeans but he usually wore tactical pants which she knew were more useful and flexible. She wasn't sure how long he'd been out of the military but he hadn't totally left it behind. In retrospect, it was probably a good thing. The military training was what kept them alive. It was the bond that kept them together and loyal to the cause and their leader.

She inhaled deeply and the lingering scent of cigarettes reminded her of him and the way he let a cig dangle from his full, sensual lips. She traced her own lips with a finger as she imagined kissing him, tasting him. Ordinarily, he was guarded, unreadable. But at the end, his hazel eyes had changed colors and danced with merriment. She wasn't stupid, she knew he could have broken her hold and hurt her if he wanted but he didn't. He didn't want to hurt her. Nope. Those eyes said he wanted to possess her. Goosebumps pebbled her arms as she wondered what it would be like to surrender to such a man. She swallowed hard. She wasn't an innocent. Before all this went down, she'd had a couple lovers but they hadn't rocked her world by any stretch. It hadn't been love, it had been curiosity more than anything. Then when Nick had captured



her and her brother, she'd willingly endured sex with him to try to gain their freedom. That hadn't worked and when she'd tried to escape, he began drugging her. The bastard had probably always drugged women because his sex game had been subpar at best.

She'd bet Arsenic was in a class of his own. Fierce urges twisted her gut whenever he was in her vicinity. She moaned as she mentally dissected the enigmatic biker. He was public relations and head of security for the club. She'd been told he earned the name Arsenic in the military because he was deadly. Now that she'd felt his strength and witnessed his calm resolve, she knew he was deadly. Which didn't scare her because deadly was a requirement in this world.

From what she understood, the club officers were ex-military and formed the club to clean up their hometown. It had worked until hell on earth became a real thing. This community they had here with clean, running water, electricity and weaponry was formidable. She'd have to study it closer to check for weaknesses. There were always weaknesses. Weaknesses got people killed.

"Lilly?" Sparrow called out.

Startled, Lilly jumped. "Yeah?"

"Everything okay? You disappeared for a while," Sparrow whispered from the darkness.

"I just needed some air."

"Eden said we shouldn't leave the room alone," Sparrow reminded her of one of the club rules.

Eden was the Prez's ol' lady and seemed nice enough. Eden was friends with Amelia, whom she knew better. The only other ol' lady at the club was Lola. She was a little older and kinda reminded Lilly of her mother. She was blunt without being mean. Lilly liked that about her. "I wasn't alone. Arsenic was on guard."

"Are you sure you're safe with him?" Lilly didn't miss the

fear in Sparrow's voice. After her ordeal Sparrow had trouble trusting men. Lilly couldn't blame her. She had endured abuse at Nick's hands but she'd ended any control he had over her when she killed him. Now, she controlled her own destiny.

Lilly flashed back to the feel of Arsenic's thickly muscled body pinning her to the wall. She still tingled from the close contact. A grin curled her lip when she remembered grabbing his junk. It hadn't felt junky at all. He had remained calm even amused throughout the encounter. "Yeah. I'm sure."

"This place seems okay. They are bikers but..."

"Yeah. The officers at least seem legit. I don't think they'd tolerate anyone abusing women." Eden and Amelia had total faith in the club and she trusted them.