

AJAX AND ANNIE.

It was a long drive back to Austin Texas.

Maybe the longest of his life because Ajax had a boat load of thinking to do on the journey.

He'd been given a lot of life revelations these past days and weeks to swallow and now he was exhausted and contemplative in mood.

His little girl was married now.

To one of the most dangerous men in the state no less.

He'd given her away to him,

grudgingly at first just because he couldn't stand the idea of not being at his only girl's side when she got married, but the happiness on Gia's face was clear to see from space, it even brought a lump to his throat as the ceremony went on and he'd watched those two kids pledge their love and life together.

Reminiscent of the day at the court house with him and Annie, a quickie wedding because their boy was already created, and it wasn't the done thing back then to have a kid out of wedlock, not for a Greek family and not for a good girl like his Annie.

He'd wanted to lock her down and make her his that first day, so it was good for Ajax.

He sometimes wondered if Annie would have married him if not for the baby on the way. He didn't give her a choice really.

He never regretted it. Even now, still his best selfish decision.

"Did I force you to marry me, Annie-girl?" His roughened voice filled the cab of his truck and she turned startled, amused eyes from her Kindle up to him. She liked nothing better than a gruesome murder mystery novel.

“I didn’t go down the aisle kicking and screaming, darling, if you remember. What’s brought this on?”

He grumbled under his breath, brows tucked down. “Just thinkin’ is all. Didn’t really give you a choice, did I? What with knocking you up. Maybe you woulda wanted to marry one of those posh dickheads who sniffed around you.”

Assholes with money and breeding.

At the time of their secret affair Ajax was a penniless second-generation Greek with no prospects other than jail in his future. He’d been in deep with the club then, dangerous runs, illegal risks that could have easily landed him in a twenty stretch inside.

He hadn’t always agreed with the rules or the idiotic dangers his brother wanted to take just to make an easy buck, but he’d followed them.

The love of his aching heart laughed until he took his eyes from the quiet highway and stared at her. Punched all over again with just how beautiful she was with her dark hair coifed and styled for the wedding yesterday.

She still looked the same as the day he met her.

He’d gotten older and craggier and his Annie was more beautiful than ever.

They could have stayed back in Colorado for a few more days at least long enough for Annie to visit with the kids before Hawk took Gia to St Bart’s for a few weeks honeymoon.

Rider’s old lady offered them a room in their house for as long as they were in town for, and though he’d been less than generous with the girl since meeting her—a grumpy, unpleasant fucker more like—he thanked her for it, but said they needed to get back home. He felt like a heel watching the blond girl’s face fall and Rider take up position behind her like he needed to protect her from his own father.

It wasn’t like that.

Ajax was just not good at communicating and being civil, he was cantankerous at the best of times and he didn't know how to go about changing.

He was a hard-headed fool and had been for far too long.

“I'd forgotten about *Jeremy Brown*. He was sweet on me, wasn't he? He bought me flowers all summer long.”

It was nearing 40 years ago and still it made Ajax's back teeth grind to dust to track that motherfucker down and choke the life out of him for ever spending a single minute wanting Ajax's woman.

He scoffed. Tasting jealousy. “Yeah, he did. While you were climbing into the back of my truck to fuck me. How did those flowers work out for the little shit, Annie?”

His Annie laughed until Ajax's mouth quirked up too. She reached across the cab and he caught her hand in the middle, kissing it again.

“I would have married you ten times over, Jax. For whatever reason but especially because you swept me off my feet and I was so in love, I saw only you in my field of vision, there's never been a doubt in my mind. Ambrosio just expedited the process. I wanted to marry you because I was crazy for the old, brooding Greek boy in his tight worn jeans and cocky grin.”

He groused under his breath that he'd been a man not a boy.

Hadn't he shown her just what a man he was every single night of that summer? He'd taught his girl things no adorable 18-year-old virgin should have known let alone practiced late at night in secret places and he didn't feel an ounce of fucking guilt for it. He wouldn't change a day of their life.

Love at first sight had been a myth or for the fools who hooked up with an old lady far too young. Not something Ajax believed in, not with his string of girlfriends and hook-ups and failed relationships.

Until Annie was on the scene.

He'd taken one look at her sweet innocence beaming out of her flawless face and his heart crashed to his fucking boots to get his grubby mitts on her and do all that couple shit he'd only seen from others.

The need to worship her had come surprisingly easy. Because when something so good lands in your lap you'd be a colossal bastard not to let it take over your heart. Annie owned him, and he'd never been afraid of showing it.

In a way she was his strength and his weakness.

Didn't care about the circumstances or how wrong it was, he'd wanted her.

From what he knew now, the same thunderclap love transpired for both of his kids. Could he really deny them when he'd had happiness all these years?

Not long after of Zara showing up he'd heard of her plight. Being the distrusting bastard, he is, Ajax had questioned his son's logic in taking her in. accused the girl of being a plant from another MC, it wasn't unheard of with those type of captives, he'd seen it before in his day and he hadn't wanted Rider being used like that.

Safe to say it didn't go over well with his boy.

That accusation came with an almighty argument he couldn't take back now.

Rider blinded by love for the girl couldn't see Ajax was looking out for him and his MC.

Turns out Ajax was wrong. Wrong about a lot of fucking things as it happened.

It didn't matter now that he couldn't tell his son he was sorry for it.

Now he knew he was wrong and they had a baby together. The sweetest princess he adored on sight and wished with all his aging heart he could see more of.

That was on Ajax. He knew it.

And he knew Annie suffered for his stubbornness. She'd love to live in Colorado again to be around the grandbaby and future grandkids. Nothing was stopping them other than his own irrational ego.

"He's a good man, Ajax. Hawk. Give the boy a chance this time, a real chance, no judgements and allow yourself to get to know your daughter's husband. Before long we'll have more grandbabies and I for one won't miss out because you're being pig-headed and can't swallow your pride. Didn't you see how they looked at each other? How *he* looked at Gia like she was the only person in his universe. They danced their first dance as husband and wife and it was if they were the only two people alive. That's love, darling." She smiled that smile that told him she was right and to shut his trap before speaking.

Ajax grumbled Greek under his breath. Not sure why since his old lady was fluent having learned when she was real young and she'd wanted to know all the endearments he whispered to her in the throes of their uncontrollable passion.

He'd knew what she meant though. He'd seen it with his own two eyes, how no one else existed in that wedding marquee for Hawk but Gia.

The way Hawk watched her from the corner when she was seeing to other guests, like the bigger man was protecting her with the sheer will of his soul and how he only relaxed the tension in his shoulders once Gia returned to him.

Ajax thought back to the surprising moment Rider came up to his side, after avoiding him most of the two days he'd been in Colorado. "He's good for her," he spoke quietly. Father and son watched Gia at her happiest laughing on the dance floor in the arms of her new husband as he spun and dipped her. Ajax's jaw hardened. "There's no one I'd trust more to keep Gia safe. He would happily stand in front of bullets for her." A pause. "Don't ruin this for them."

Being warned off by his own son really was the icing on the fucking cake when it was automatically assumed he was only there to wreck his little girl's joy when it was fucking clear to see she was deliriously in love.

It rubbed Ajax raw his son had felt the need to even issue him a warning in the first place.

They'd fallen so far from their father son relationship Ajax could no longer see it.

Once upon a blue moon ago Rider worshipped his dad. He'd been Ajax's shadow, soaking up every piece of MC advice given. Rider took to prospecting like a duck to water, a true natural. It was more than obvious he'd be a leader one day.

Maybe he'd been wide of the mark to let Rider come around the club so young, but the boy had been keen, with ambition to prospect for the Renegade Souls since before middle school.

It was clear as day now he'd been too hard on him.

Pushing him to be the best and the best had only caused an irreparable rift between the men that seemed next to impossible to fix now.

Rider didn't trust him.

And that's what gutted him the most.

Annie went on rubbing salt into his brooding wound as only his wife could because she knew him best of all and knew where he had soft spots when it came to driving home her point. He fucking loved that woman. "Remember when Jed wanted to kill you?"

Ajax snorted, raising both his eyebrows. "He coulda tried. Woulda failed."

"But don't you see? He thought *you* weren't good enough for me either. Too old, no ambition, he didn't think you'd take care of me, and he didn't want me involved in the biker world with a bunch of criminals and thugs."

Yeah, he hadn't forgotten he'd gone after Annie Sotherland like a bull chasing a red cape or the fact her older brother ... more Ajax's age...had disapproved and had words with him on more than one occasion to stay-the-fuck away from her.

It was a no-no to go after one of the club's female relatives.

Didn't matter she was only 18 or Jed's sister and he was 32 at the time. Nothing would have stopped Ajax from courting her, having her, making her his old lady.

And never once all this time later had he expressed regret for the decision or for going against the wishes of all her family.

Annie is as she was then his beating heart.

The reason he was the man he was.

He'd be doing time in a prison cell for sure or dead if it weren't for her.

Because of Annie he knew he had something to live for. Not to take such punk ass risks in his work. Knowing she was at home waiting for him he had a greater incentive to be the kind of man worthy of her love.

He reached over while he was driving and captured her hand, bringing it to his lips as he stroked over her knuckles, saw the wedding band, engagement ring and the newest eternity ring he'd bought her for their last anniversary.

He realized his double standards for keeping Hawk away from Gia all these years. The second he'd seen Rider's quiet friend looking at his daughter a decade ago he'd recognized the same look Ajax himself experienced years previous the first time with Annie sitting in her old man's car.

Even with the throw-down fights he'd found himself in nearly daily with Jed.

Nothing stopped him getting what he wanted.

He'd thought one thing about Hawk, only, Ajax had been deceived this whole time. What he thought he knew about Hawk was all a lie fabricated by his psycho parent and now he not only carried guilt on his shoulders for hating the boy, but

also for knowing Gia loved Hawk for a decade and because of Ajax he'd played a hand in his daughter not having her full happiness.

“I was proud of you for shaking Hawk's hand and apologizing, Jax. I know it wasn't easy, it never is to admit a wrong or to let go of pride and my man is prideful.”

Ajax swallowed hard.

Why Annie saw the good in him he'd didn't know. Nearly 40 years married, and she was never without a word of encouragement or praise for him.

He felt like scum some days for letting his temper speak first, especially with his boy. That relationship appeared to be severed for good. No matter how he tried to bridge the gap of his own doing, he only ended up making it worse.

His Annie would say he and Rider were too alike.

Two bulls butting heads.

He went wrong so many times with his boy it was impossible to make it up now.

He could start by stopping Rex.

His big brother always did have high expectations when it came to his own ego.

The fucking brass balls on him thinking he could fuck with Ajax's family and not get caught.

Ajax had never cared for Rex's ego, having loved his big brother and followed him into one criminally lawful job after another for decades until Rex was able to rise in the ranks of the club and took over the gavel, making Ajax his second in command.

It was a total fucking gut punch hearing it from Rex's own drunken mouth how he was paying the Russian *bratva* to cause as much trouble for Rider's club to keep them busy, so he could methodically break them apart from the inside. He had plans to take out one or more old lady, to cause shit, to undercut Rider's businesses, to steal and destroy. Oh, yeah. Rex, in his drunken glee thought Ajax was on his side when he spilled his plans.

How Ajax kept his temper that night and didn't kill that motherfucker right there in his own home he still didn't know. But he was still shaking with fury.

He'd supported Rex during the whole shit storm of Rider bringing a vote of no confidence in their president and then watching Rex ousted from the main seat and Rider within an hour voted in from every member loyal to him. Unlucky for Rex the older generation didn't hold the numbers and within a week they too were ejected.

Through all that Ajax stayed at his brother's side, a sense of family loyalty, he'd handed over his VP patch to Rider, wished his son luck and walked out of the club.

Never once telling him how proud of him he was.

Never once since had those words crossed his lips.

Though he was proud.

Immensely fucking proud of the man Rider was, the man he'd been and how he'd singlehandedly turned the profit of the club around into a multimillion power house out doing any neighboring MC in any of the states by a score.

An hour into their journey, Annie choosing for them to drive so she could enjoy the scenery when a plane ride meant they'd be home by now, he stopped at a diner. His Annie liked her snacks.

Maybe it was the day, and how fucked up his head was over his kids, but he was remembering all kinds of things he'd forgotten.

How he'd bring Annie all her favorite chocolates whenever they had a date. He did it because it made her smile but also because she attacked his mouth the minute they were alone, and he'd do anything for her kisses.

Nothing had changed there. She still tied his intestines in knots.

As he opened the diner door for her to let her go in first his free hand placed on her shoulder, she looked up at him with her serene smile and he saw his teen Annie-girl all over again.

The excitement in her eyes, eager to be alone with him too. They'd had so many stolen moments he should have been guilty over. If he'd been capable of guilt that is. Instead, they were some of his best memories. Him and Annie in his shitty one-bedroom apartment over the hardware store. She'd cook him meatloaf then tease him into dancing around the shitty living room and then they'd make love for hours until it was time to drive her home and sneak her in through her bedroom window.

He should have been shot and hog tied for all the things he'd done to her that summer. He'd been a fully-grown man panting after a too-young girl who brazenly knew she had him wound around her little finger.

The dawn mornings he climbed out of her second-floor bedroom window before her brother, who was Annie's sole caregiver ever since their parents were killed when she was little more than a teen, could find him in her room all night teaching his young girl how to scream into a pillow while he rode her hard from behind.

Jed would have ripped his head off had he even once walked into her room and saw just what his sweet, pure sister was doing with her head beneath the thin sheets as Ajax held her nape and taught her in hushed whispers just how to suck his cock and hold her breath at the same time.

The times he'd sneaked out of work at the body shop just, so he could walk her home from her job and she'd run into his arms like she hadn't seen him in weeks. Annie made him feel ten feet tall and that maybe ... just maybe he could amount to something other than a jailbird deadbeat.

He leaned down to her smaller height and tapped a kiss that lasted five seconds to her smiling lips. "Love you, Annie-girl."

Her beaming smile filled him with that same love he got having her run into his arms decades ago. Like she saw him for someone he could have been, and some days wished he had been the person Annie saw in him.

She curled her hand into his.

She was so small he could still tuck her into his side and not know she was there. “Love you back, Jax.”

Maybe that was all it took.

To be the person someone else expected you to be.

Fucked if he knew.

He felt too old to change who he was, but a change was needed if he was to be part of his kids’ lives going forward.

He’d handed over the information to Rider about Rex; names, times, dates, plans, and his boy was quick enough to get him out of there.

Never including him in the steps to take from there.

He’d just wanted Ajax gone.

Not gonna lie, that shit hurt.

But he had to accept his son leadership and if that meant Rider didn’t trust him to side with him against Rex then he had to respect his wishes.

Didn’t mean he wouldn’t take his own measures to stop Rex from his end.

Ajax may no longer be the VP, but he had contacts, he had loyal men still working for him.

One way or another Rex would be stopped before he could do damage to Rider and the club.

As it was, it would take all of Ajax’s acting skills to be around his brother now ever since finding out he’d given Gia’s name to the *bratva* to use against Rider.

The asshole had severed Ajax’s last port of loyalty between brothers.

As far as Ajax was concerned he no longer had a brother.

“Do what you gotta do with this,” he’d told his boy. And meant it. If that was to put Rex in an early grave, then he’d stand by the decision.

You don’t fuck with family. It was what Rex himself drummed into Ajax at a young age when Rex himself brought his younger brother into the MC fold.

In turn Ajax had taught Rider the same lesson.

Only two of the three Marinos boys stuck to that creed.

Greed and power hungry had driven Rex to forget that fucking rule.

The old man just didn’t know when to sit back and enjoy life with his family and know his ruling days were long over.

Trying to live the glory days was for the fools and Ajax liked the quieter life with his wife.

“You’re quiet, darling.” Annie mentioned once their food arrived. They were sitting opposite each other in red plastic booths along the window wall facing outside.

He lifted his head. “Just thinkin’.”

“Want to share?”

She didn’t mean the double fudge cake. His Annie would give a stranger the coat off her back and wouldn’t once complain about being cold but would she hell share sweets. She’d once told him “If you wanted pie, Ajax Marinos then you best beg your mama to bake you one, because this slice here is mine.”

And damn if she didn’t mean it. Ajax grinned at the memory.

He’d bribed so much over the years with her beloved sweets.

Dirty, underhanded tricks to get her out of her clothes in exchange for the candies he carried in his pocket just for her. She loved shoving her hands down into his jeans pockets to see what he’d brought for her.

He had no idea how she was so healthy and slim, but he wasn’t complaining.

Not when he watched her every night get ready for bed sitting at the custom-built dressing table he'd made for her and slathered on lotions and whatnots and brushed her hair glossy and then slid into one of her lacy things she came to bed in. She was so fucking beautiful, and she'd chosen him. A nobody.

"I gotta tell you somethin' and you ain't gonna like it."

"Okay." She placed her fork down, dabbed her mouth on a napkin and gave him her eyes.

When he was done telling her about Rex her face had changed.

From flawless perfection to seething red.

Her teeth grit so hard he heard her jaw crunch and he had to reach out and place his hand over his clenched fist.

His Annie's temper always did explode like a volcano for such a sweet, quiet girl. She had her pushing point just like anyone.

"That little weasel shit bag!" She hissed and made a few heads turn their way.

He didn't know why he found her funny but Ajax grinned.

"I mean it, Jax. I loathe your brother. *There*, I said it. I never liked him, I tried for your sake, but I can't stand the sanctimonious dickhead or his dumb as a brick wife, and why she stays with him I'll never know because he treats her abysmally." His wife visibly shaken at the news, attacked everyone in Rex's family from his cook to his gardener. Ajax grinned at his spitfire just shutting his damn mouth until she was finished. "He came on to me more than once," she announced and stopped his heart. All humor faded.

"He what?"

"Oh, yeah." She screwed her face with a look of aversion. "Always at his crappy parties he threw like he was King Tut of the neighborhood. I never wanted to go to, remember? He'd blame it on a bit of drunken fun the next day."

Teeth clenched. If he needed a new reason to hate his brother, there it was. Rex always did take a fancy to Annie, Ajax wasn't blind, he'd just chosen to ignore it because he was busy falling in love. "Why didn't you ever tell me?"

"Because you love your shithead brother and I didn't want to be the Yoko and split you up. I stayed out of his way and made it clear he said anything like that to me again and I'd tell his wife."

Ajax sighed. "I'm sorry, baby. I should have known so I could stop him."

Annie's hands covered his over the Formica table. "You don't always have to fix everything alone, darling. And not with this either. Work with Ambrosio. Our boy will need it."

"He doesn't want my help. He told me plainly when he showed me the door."

Annie wasn't put off. "That's pride talking. You have a lot of it yourself. It takes a big man to drop his ego at the door and say sorry. You've started off right by taking this to him. Now you let him know you're there if he needs anything and when shit gets rough, as it inevitably will, you don't walk away, you dig in and you wait our boy out."

It wasn't that easy, but his wife saw life in sunshine and rainbows and optimism.

He loved her for it.

In a world of dirt, she was forever his heaven.

"Love you, Annie-girl." He repeated. Had he told her enough lately? He didn't think so. Things get in the way and one day turns into weeks. He felt a sharp stab of guilt. He should never be too busy for his wife. Was he fucking crazy?

Annie was the whole thing. Since the moment he saw the lively girl giving him the up and down look for a man who was too old for the teen, to this very second with her smiling across a table in a shitty diner.

A man didn't always get so lucky, he reckoned.

He'd fallen in shit so many times during his years that to come up smelling of roses with his Annie on his side, he knew he must've done a good deed for some fucker in a past life.

A man like Ajax Marinos never deserved her but by god he'd lapped up every second ever since.

"You are in a mood, aren't you?" She gave him her smile... almost coaxing smile and he felt his belly muscles tighten and head spin. When he looked at the tension he carried in his shoulders lessened. "Maybe, we could stop at one of those salacious motels along the highway and test out this mood of yours, Ajax. Hmm?"

Dear fucking god.

She hadn't even touched a piece of her cake or the slab of pie she'd ordered, nor sipped her milky coffee when Ajax threw down notes on the table and slid out, offering her his hand.

She giggled slipping her hand in his, daring to give him her sexy look from under her painted lashes.

Giggled like she was eighteen again and they were about to sneak off to fuck all afternoon.

Her laughter coated his dark soul.

Maybe his old body couldn't give her that kind of time again, not without his heart packing up, but his Annie-girl wanted a fun afternoon in a dirty motel, he'd give her that.

She'd done what she always set out to do and that was occupy his mind. Because when his mind was on Annie it freed him up to shift through the shit and see what he really needed to do.

He didn't have to be one thing or another. He could be both.

His old self but a newer version to reconnect with his kids.

His son most of all. And his son's family.

He couldn't make up for lost time, but maybe, just maybe there was some light at the end of the tunnel if he was able to help bring his fucking brother to heel and stop him harming Rider's hard work. Give his son some peace to enjoy his own family time.

The point being, he'd do as Annie said and not fucking give up this time.

No matter how ugly words might get between him and Rider.

And they were bound to get fucking ugly.

Rider didn't much like his old man right now.

He kissed her forehead. Brought his mind back to right now.

Laying his palm on her ass through the thin cotton dress she wore he heard her dreamy sigh. "What about my sweets? I could have gotten them to go."

Sinful. That was his girl. Her eyes darkened with lust. A look he would recognize even if he were a blind man. No other taste saturated Ajax's air faster than Annie's lust.

"I got your sweets right here, Annie-girl, now get in the truck before I embarrass us both and maybe break a hip by rutting you on the floor."

She laughed loud in that way of hers he loved and poked long fingers into his ribs. Laughed in a flurry until his hands itched to get on her all over. It was true what they said. You find a good woman, she'd keep you hungry for the rest of your life because the need for her never stopped hurting.

"The day Ajax Marinos feels shame is the day it rains frogs. You've always been a dirty old man."

Lucky for him he was *her* dirty old man and she'd never wanted him to change. Someone had blessed him with this woman.

Suddenly the urgency to get her alone so he could have her soft lips tripled. She always let him love her mouth for as long as he wanted. And Ajax wanted until he could hardly swallow.

On a day when life was shit, she'd walked onto his page like it was fucking divine involvement looking out for him, and she'd owned his old bones ever since. His equal. His wife and his forever.

There was no thought about marriage back then or taking an old lady until Annie Sotherland appeared in his life and from that moment it was all he thought about.

Two kids and a grandkid later here he was.

The luckiest fucker on two legs. Still holding the hand of the girl he loved.

And with a mountain of worry still plaguing him—what was new there—his mind was focused in on other things for the moment. Annie most importantly.

If he felt like he'd been neglecting her lately, emotionally at least, then he had a lot of shit to make up for.

He might be on the latter half of life now, but he'd treasure her for as long as he had her for. Annie was a gift. A pure jewel of his heart.

He might not have shown it in the ways he needed to over the years, but family was everything to him.

He needed to find a way now to show his kids he was wrong, and he was sorry, and he'd like a second chance to be their dad.

To be a father in law to Zara and Hawk and a Pop-pop to Harper and any other kids that came along.

He wasn't too ornery to admit his mistakes.

His Annie chewed his head off too many times over the years about that very thing. And she'd been right.

His wife, as any man should admit if he wasn't a jackass, was *always* right.

Mistakes and reversing their effects were not gonna be as simple as two easy steps or sharing a beer together.

His boy was stubborn. Ajax was stubborn.

But he wanted his family back.

And he wanted to join the war if his brother tried to start one.

Don't fuck with a Marinos. Especially not against another Marinos.

His dumb as fuck brother should have remembered that.

“Motel, darling...” his wife murmured, playing with the loop of his jeans, making his abdominal muscles tighten. “Leave the thinking behind for now.”

His gaze was heated. She knew him well.

“Hey, Annie-girl.” He said helping her into the passenger seat, before closing the door he grinned rakishly, brushed a thumb over her lips and had the joy of electricity when she licked him. He watched her cheeks flush. “Remember how I taught you to scream into a pillow while my head was between your legs?” He leaned into the cab and kissed that flush. Her skin smelled of flowers and love and *him*.

She was laughing when he rounded the engine. “You know I do, bad, bad, dirty old man.” She scolded playfully, placing her hand on his inner thigh right where he was rock hard.

He'd show his old lady just how bad he could be.