

# Claimed by my Brother's Best Friends

## Chapter 17

Alyssa

I shake off the horrible memory, forcing myself to focus on the here and now. Mason flips a page in his book, completely absorbed, giving me the space to breathe and collect my thoughts. His presence is strangely comforting, even if I'm still wary of his intentions.

Zuri's soft coos draw my attention, and I smile down at her. "You hungry, baby girl?" I murmur, lifting her into my arms. I carry her to the kitchen, feeling Mason's eyes on me as I prepare a bottle.

"Do you need any help?" Mason's deep voice startles me, and I nearly drop the can of formula on the floor. I turn to find him standing in the doorway, his expression unreadable.

Is he really speaking to me, or am I that out of my mind that I'm imagining it?

"I'm fine," I reply, trying to calm my racing heart. "Just feeding her."

He nods, but doesn't move, watching as I set Zuri on the counter and finish making the bottle. Once I do, I settle her back into my arms, and hand her the bottle. My eyes lift to find Mason continuing to watch us, his gaze softening as he observes Zuri.

"She's beautiful," he says softly. "Looks just like you."

I smile. "So I've heard."

We make our way back to the living room, and I sit on the couch while Mason returns to the armchair. "Uh, what are you reading?" I ask, since I guess we're actually having a conversation right now. Zuri greedily sucks down her bottle, not paying any attention to us.

Mason laughs nervously, rubbing the back of his neck. "Oh, um, 'Salem's Lot'. Stephen King is my favorite author."

Wow, so he reads on the regular.

That's pretty hot.

I smile at him. "Wow, I didn't think you'd be into thrillers."

I really wanted to say I didn't think he'd be into reading, but that sounds rude.

"Yeah. Are you?" he asks, leaning against the door, his stance casual yet attentive.

"Uh, no. I've got enough going on in my life that I don't need anything else giving me nightmares," I say with a nervous laugh.

He adjusts his glasses, a slight frown forming on his lips. "Yeah, I heard. I'm sorry about that."

I wave dismissively. "There's nothing to be sorry about. It was my own naive decision."

He doesn't reply, but I notice the subtle tick of his jaw.

After Zuri finishes her bottle, I play some more with her on the floor before trying to call Gray. Once again, his phone goes straight to voicemail.

What the fuck? How was King able to speak to him? Does my own brother not pick up his phone for anyone but his little gang members?

I glance at Mason, who's engrossed in his book. "Hey, Mason. Do you know where my brother is?" I ask, trying to sound like I'm inquiring innocently. Maybe since he's talking to me, he's willing to give up information that the others won't.

He glances up from his book, his eyes narrowed. "I'm not inclined to say," he replies stoically.

Fuck.

"Why? Is King going to spank you if you do?" I snap, annoyed that I was wrong. He's not going to tell me shit. Wow, King really has them on a short leash. I know it isn't Gray. Gray just barks orders and expects King to carry them out for him.

He's always done that. Even when we were kids, and I was only able to get a tiny glance into what the Crimson Reapers really do.

Mason snorts. "No, I just follow orders."

I seethe. "Well then, where did King and Niko go?"

He just stares at me, his expression as stony as ever.

Dammit. Is Gray on some kind of top-secret spy mission or something? What the hell do I need to do to get some answers around here?

I sigh heavily. "You guys are infuriating. How am I expected to trust you if no one will tell me anything?"

He places his bookmark back into the book and closes it, placing it on the end table. Then, he turns his full attention towards me. "I know it must be hard to trust us, but we only want to keep you and your daughter safe until Gray returns."

His answer sounds robotic, but I accept it because there's no point in arguing with him.

"Yeah, yeah," I mutter. "Well, it's nice to hear your voice for once. I used to think King kept an invisible muzzle on you."

His mouth twitches. "Uh, thanks. I just didn't want you to be uncomfortable around me."

When I laugh, Zuri glances up at me. "I've been staying here for a couple of days now. I think being uncomfortable is something I need to get used to."

In reality, I'm actually way too comfortable here. And that's a fucking problem.

Something flickers in Mason's eyes, but it's gone just as quickly. "Is there anything else you need to make your stay more comfortable? I can pick it up for you," he offers.

That reminds me that I have a car now. Courtesy of a rather suspiciously generous asshole.

But leaving the house still twists my stomach in knots.

"I'm good for now, thanks. Plus I don't want to accidentally run into Isaac. I'm sure he's searching high and low for me right now."

Mason's expression darkens, his eyes narrowing slightly. "You'll never have to be afraid of him hurting you again. If you're not ready, that's fine. But just know that I'll protect you. And the others will too. Men like him don't deserve to live."

The dark edge in his voice catches me off guard, sending a chill down my spine. It's not like I've heard him speak much, but I didn't think he could be that damn intense.

I laugh it off. "I like how you guys keep casually offering to kill my husband. He's not worth it...the prison sentence I mean. I'll find another way to make sure he stays away from us."

He just stares at me, his gaze never leaving my face. "No, he's going to die," he says with certainty. "Once Gray finds out, he'll have King deal with him. I hate to tell you, but you'll have no say about it."

I glance down at Zuri, whose eyes are starting to glaze over with sleep. How will I ever explain it to her? That I had her father killed? It would be much easier to say that he wasn't a safe person, and he's not allowed to see us, but knowing that I'm the reason he's dead? I'm not sure if that's a burden I'm able to bear.

I know it's been a few years since we've seen each other, but he's still the Gray I know. He can be reasonable at times. If I tell him I don't want my husband murdered, then I expect him to listen to my wishes.

If not, I'll have to convince King to betray his brother. And I don't even want to begin to think about what he'll want in return.