

## Preview of Cottonmouth MC 2: Shade by Jamie Targaet

### Prologue

*A few months earlier...*

### Shade

When Creep texted us that evening to roll out to *Ned's Sundown Lounge*, we should've fucking known it was gonna be some kind of bullshit.

He had said Eli wanted to clear the air. That there'd been talk in the club, and we deserved to hear things straight about a "sensitive topic." The timing was too damn convenient. Me and Ripper had been tearing up every road between Oak Ridge and the Kentucky line looking for our brother Tank. And now suddenly Eli wanted a sit-down? Either it was about Tank, or it was one hell of a coincidence that they had some big revelation to drop right when our brother was missing.

The last time I talked to Tank had been the day he apparently "disappeared." He came over to my apartment, and had Ripper meet us there. I remember him lighting a cigarette like it might keep his hands steady. He told us straight up that he didn't like where things were heading in the Oak Grove chapter of Cottonmouth MC. Said the club's president Eli was making promises to people you didn't want to owe favors to. Running guns was one thing. Hell, even drugs. There's a code for that. But selling drugs to kids? Selling the kids *themselves*?

Human trafficking was a line Tank just couldn't cross. And I got it. So did Ripper. We'd all done dirt, but this was rot. Real, soul-deep shit that blackened whatever was left of the Cottonmouth name in Oak Grove.

Tank had been ready to go storm the compound and tell them what's what. Sure, we all *wanted* to do that. But there was only one way it was going to go with that corrupt bunch of assholes. They were making a shit ton of money, and they didn't feel any pain from the activities Sinister Skin brought to Oak Grove. Of course they weren't going to listen. No, they protected their gig.

I all but begged Tank not to confront them. I told him all we had to do was lay low for a while, fade into the background. When the time was right, we'd just quietly head back to Abingdon or some other chapter. In my head, we could take the path of least resistance and be rid of it all in time.

Tank? He was adamant that my approach wouldn't work. He kept saying that with everything we knew, Eli wouldn't just let us slip away.

Me and Ripper had grown up with Tank, and we knew him better than anyone. The three of us had come over to the Oak Grove chapter from Abingdon just a few weeks back. We heard they needed muscle, and extra hands for some well-paying "special projects" that were hush-hush even by Cottonmouth standards. There wasn't a lot going on in our neck of the woods, and the promise of money sounded good. We rode in together, loyal to the patch and each other.

The first couple of weeks were quiet. Maybe a little uneasy, but quiet. Then the tone shifted. Shit started feeling off. Secrets were spread behind closed doors. The side glances lasted too long, and way too many questions were answered with silence.

Then Tank disappeared. There were no goodbyes, no warning.

I've never believed in coincidences. Not in this club, and not with those men.

Tank had been missing for three days now. There'd been no word. He wasn't answering our calls or texts. I even drove over to his place. Tank wasn't there. There was no way to tell if his shit was gone too. But Tank wasn't the type to just vanish. If he was off the radar, it meant something bad had gone down.

And now Creep was calling us into *Ned's* like everything was fine.

Things were far from fucking fine.

Somehow, I knew. Deep down, I fucking knew Eli and his goons had something to do with Tank's disappearance. I also knew that whatever Creep was going to say wasn't gonna be the truth. But there was gonna be a story.

With Ripper at my side, I stepped through the door of *Ned's* that night like I owned the damn place. Truth was, none of us owned it. Not anymore. Not since a certain criminal group that went by the name Sinister Skin started sniffing around and Eli started making deals with the devil.

The bar had apparently been Cottonmouth territory for years, a place to unwind, drink, brawl, or blow off steam. That was before our time in the Oak Grove chapter.

So yeah, I noticed real quick when most of the bar, half of them Cottonmouths, stiffened like they'd just seen a fucking ghost.

The air reeked of cowardice and cheap whiskey. Conversations stopped mid-sentence. People shifted in their seats, glancing down into their glasses, pretending they didn't see us. And these weren't strangers. These were our brothers, and fellow Cottonmouths. Now they barely had the balls to look at me.

Ripper leaned toward me, his voice low. "Why does it feel like we just walked into a fuckin' wake?"

Maybe we had. They just hadn't buried the body yet.

Creep was part of Eli inner circle. He was posted up at the bar like a smug little king, his lips curled in a smile that made me want to smash his face straight through the counter. His cut was unzipped, hanging loose like he didn't give a damn about club pride anymore. He was tall and gangly, looking like he'd crawled out of some gutter and forgot how to get back. Pasty, gaunt skin clung to sharp cheekbones like it was trying to escape. His teeth, what few he had left, were yellow and rotting, like he didn't bother brushing them. The stringy mess of dark hair hanging around his face didn't help.

The name *Creep* was fucking accurate. He looked like the kind of guy who stared too long at girls half his age and laughed when no one else was joking. And he was smiling when he spotted me, like he thought he was the smartest bastard in the room.

He raised his glass as we approached. "Shade. Ripper. Glad you came."

I didn't answer. I just stood there, letting the tension between us play out. I wanted the little bastard to feel it.

He took a sip of his drink e. "Figured you'd want to hear it from me."

I kept my voice calm. "Hear what?"

He was dragging it out. The fucker was enjoying this while that dumb kid -- what was his name? Nate? -- watched on with the stupid grin he always seemed to be wearing.

"Tank," he said finally. "He's gone."

*Gone.* That was how he said it. Like Tank had just wandered off.

Ripper straightened beside me. "Gone where?"

"Nomad." Creep shrugged. "Couldn't stomach the direction Eli's takin' us in. Said it was gettin' too heavy. So, he packed his shit and bailed. Didn't even say goodbye to anybody."

There it was. The lie I expected. Tank went nomad? They expected us to believe that one of the bravest sumbitches I'd ever known couldn't handle the business or the pressure? No fucking way.

Tank didn't bail. And he sure as hell didn't run.

I stepped closer, slow and deliberate, until I could smell the rot on Creep's breath over the liquor-soaked air. The whole damn bar had gone quiet. Every eye in the place was locked on us now. Ripper didn't say a word. But he was ready behind me, just in case.

"You really expect me to believe that?" I asked, keeping my voice low. "That Tank, the same brother who we've bled with, spilled blood for, ran off without a word 'cause things got *heavy*?"

Creep's smirk slipped just a fraction. "Look, I'm just tellin' you what I heard--"

"From who?" I cut in, my hand finding the blade inside my cut. "Tank himself? You and I both know better than that."

The fucker tried to act confused, but I saw the flash of fear in his dark eyes. "Man, I ain't got nothin' to do with--"

I moved fast. One hand slammed him back against the bar, the other drawing steel. The tip of my blade pressed right up under his chin, catching that patchy beard of his as I leaned in.

"Lie one more goddamn time," I growled, "and I'll gut you right here in front of all these weak-ass cowards you drink with."

Creep swallowed hard. "Shade--"

"You think I won't?" I pushed my blade deeper into his skin, making him wince. "You think I'm just going to listen to you lie about my brother? Tell me what *really* happened, Creep. What did Eli and the rest of you fucks do?"

His beady little eyes went wider. The man was literally trembling against the edge of my blade. One wrong twitch, and I'd open him from throat to belly.

It got quiet. Even the bawdy country music playing on the jukebox seemed muted. The entire bar was on-edge, and no one dared to step between us. Ripper stayed ready at my back.

"I don't know shit," Creep finally whispered.

"Wrong answer." I dragged the blade down his chest just enough to split his T-shirt, to carve into the leather of his cut, and draw a hot line of red beneath all of it. I didn't cut *too* deep. Just enough to make him squeal in front of his cowardly little buddies. They all got to see that Shade wasn't someone you fucking crossed, and Tank wasn't someone you lied about.

Creep howled and shoved back, stumbling off the barstool and crashing into a table behind him.

"That will leave a nice scar," I said, turning to the rest of them and pointing at Creep with my blade. "Let it remind all of you what happens when you fucking lie to me."

And then, to Creep directly, I said, "If I ever find out that something happened to Tank and you had a hand in it, you're fucking dead."

Creep clutched his chest, blood leaking between his bony fingers. The man's eyes were wild with fury and shame. I was folding up my knife and turning to go when he barked out a sound halfway between a laugh and a snarl.

"You think you're untouchable, Shade?" he spat in a ragged voice. "You better watch your back. It ain't just Eli you need to worry about anymore."

I turned slow, just enough to glance over my shoulder. "You mean those snakes Eli let crawl in here while we weren't lookin'? The ones sellin' girls and fucking poison out the back doors of our town?"

Creep didn't answer. I think he knew better.

I took a step closer, staring him down. "I ain't afraid of criminals playin' club. And I sure as hell ain't afraid of *you*."

Creep glared at me, but his hand was still pressed tight to his ribs. He wouldn't be making a move tonight, and he knew it.

Ripper moved past him on the way out, moving slowly, like a warning wrapped in leather and steel. "You best be careful what you say about your brothers," he said as he stared Creep down. "Sometimes it comes back to bite you in the ass."

Creep muttered something. I thought I heard him say something to the effect of "this one ain't coming back." But when I turned back to glare at him, he wisely shut up.

The man's parting words didn't sit well with me. Was Tank dead? Had they gone that fucking far?

We walked out like we'd set fire to the place, and just maybe we had. *Ned's* would remember. Creep sure as hell would.

And next time? I would cut him the fuck in half.



## Chapter One

### Shade

The compound was quiet, and the yard was littered with toolboxes, paint cans, and various other supplies we were using to patch everything up after the club's civil war a few weeks ago.

Our place had been torn to hell in the shootout that took place when we took Eli and his slimy inner circle down, getting them the fuck out of our chapter and compound. Vendetta, the man who'd once been Tank but who had survived the hanging meant to kill him, had led us back to reclaim the Oak Grove chapter for the loyal Cottonmouths. We'd won with a little help from the Hounds of Hell in Mercy. After the celebration, our compound was left with bullet holes, splintered frames, and busted glass. It had been a hell of a mess to clean up, and we weren't done yet.

I was out back, replacing the siding on the last barrack that needed outside repairs. I had a hammer in one hand, and a headache that had been riding me since dawn. Still, I couldn't shake the thought that we just might be wasting our damn time. We'd fix this place up, sure, but for how long? Yeah, Eli was dead and some of his crew were gone with him. But not all of them. Creep had been shot but he'd somehow survived that night. That fucker could still be running around. A few others loyal to Eli had made it out too.

Sinister Skin wasn't going anywhere. Of that I was sure. And until we flushed out the rest of that rot, the repairs we made almost felt like a Band-Aid over a bullet wound.

"Guess it's time to start on indoor repairs," Ripper muttered, strolling out with a cold beer and no shame.

Vendetta followed him out, looking a little rougher than he usually did. But that was our friend's new normal these days. The patch on his chest said *president*, and he wore it like it had its claws dug into him. Dylan had finally got him to sleep a full night last week. Ripper and I damn near threw a party. Vendetta was a good man but he's a grouchy asshole on no rest.

"Got word from Mercy this morning," Vendetta said, cracking his neck. "Snow says there's no sign of the cartel left over there. At least not so far. Guess threatening Player's girl wasn't the brilliant move El Cuervo thought it was."

Ripper snorted. "You mean right before she pulled a gun on him? Shit, I'll never forget the look on Player's face. Like he was about to pass out and propose all at the same time."

Vendetta smirked. "Yeah, the cartel folded faster than I thought they would, honestly. If I had to guess, the Hounds haven't seen the last of them."

"If they come back, are we helping out?" Ripper said.

Vendetta nodded. "Most likely. Locked and loaded."

I didn't disagree, but I didn't join in either. Cartel trouble made for good stories now that the business was done. But we were still knee-deep in our own brand of hell here in Oak Grove dealing with the remnants of Sinister Skin. The Hounds in Mercy had booted them out of their territory. It looked like we still needed to do the same.

"I'm glad we helped them out." Shaking his head, Vendetta said, "It's the least we could do. We couldn't have taken this place back with just half the club. They helped us pull it through."

Before any of us could say more, I heard footsteps coming closer. Two of our prospects, Cowboy and JJ, came running in like their asses were on fire. Both were out of breath, wide-eyed, and wired.

"Boss," Cowboy gasped. "You're gonna want to hear this."

Vendetta straightened up instantly. I set down the drywall knife and wiped dust from my hands.

"We just saw Creep," JJ said. "He ain't dead."

Silence fell like a goddamn hammer. I fucking knew it. *Creep*. That scrawny piece of shit had a face I wish I could forget and a scar down the middle of his chest that I'd personally gifted him. The bastard was supposed to be out of Oak Grove. Gone and smart enough to stay gone. I'd *known* he wasn't dead.

Vendetta's voice dropped low. "Where?"

JJ swallowed hard. "Here, on the edge of our own fucking property."

My head snapped up. "You're kidding me. He came here?"

“And he wasn’t alone,” JJ said. “Eagle was with him.”

I had to laugh at that. “Eagle? That prick’s still walking?”

JJ nodded. “And get this. They had a couple of guys with them we didn’t recognize. They weren’t from around here, but they looked like muscle.”

“They approach you?” Vendetta asked.

Cowboy shook his head. “Nah. They saw us coming and bolted. Didn’t say a damn word.”

“Vehicle?” Vendetta asked.

“Black SUV. Nice one,” Cowboy answered. “Tinted windows. Couldn’t see plates.”

Of course it was a nice SUV. Sinister Skin loved riding on money they didn’t earn.

Vendetta stepped in closer. “Where exactly did you see them?”

“At the old south gate,” Cowboy replied. “Right where the fence line dips.”

I shook my head. Fifty acres of land surrounded the compound, most of it wild and untouched. The woods were thick enough that a man could ghost through them without ever being spotted. We had cameras and sensors up at the main gates, but out there? A couple of wrong turns and someone could camp out on us for days before we ever knew.

Vendetta must’ve been thinking the same thing, because his eyes narrowed in that calculating way of his.

Vendetta’s gaze met mine. “You thinking what I’m thinking?”

I already was.

"If I had to guess, they're trying to rebuild," I said. "Trying to keep Sinister Skin's shit alive under a new flag."

"Or a temporary one," Ripper added.

Vendetta gave the two younger Cottonmouths a nod. "Good work. Now I want you two to stay on the perimeter today. Keep eyes on it. No contact, no hero shit. Just eyes."

JJ's spine straightened like he'd just won an award. "Yes, sir."

"You see anyone besides Creep and Eagle, you let us know right away," Vendetta added.

The prospects headed back the way they came. As soon as they were out of earshot, Vendetta turned toward me.

Creep. Eagle. Unknown muscle. Icons of every problem we hadn't finished burning out of Oak Ridge.

"They're scouting us," Vendetta muttered.

"Yeah," I said, rolling my shoulders, muscles humming for a fight. "And they're stupid enough to do it on our land."

Ripper shook his head. "The fuckers are still here and still working with Sinister Skin. Jesus."

"I'd bet on it," I muttered. It was already leaving a bad taste in my mouth. "Sinister Skin doesn't give a shit who the club president is. They made a deal with Eli, not the patch. They're still going to expect the Cottonmouths to hold up our end of the bargain."

Vendetta nodded grimly. "Not *these* Cottonmouths. We didn't agree to any of it, and I'll go to war over that. That's Creep and Eagle's problem now. That group will expect business to keep moving. And if it doesn't--" "They're dead," I finished for him.

All three of us stood there letting that sink in. We weren't just talking about traitors. We were talking about assholes left from Eli's regime, caught in a trap of their own making. Hell, we could still be implicated because of Eli and his bunch before it was all over with.

Vendetta exhaled frustration, the half-empty beer bottle in his hand forgotten. "Alright. Let's lock it down."

*Now we're talking.* I was already keyed up.

"I want double coverage on both gates," Vendetta went on, his voice cool and clipped in that way that always meant shit was about to get serious. "No one gets in or out without us knowing."

Ripper tossed his empty bottle into the trash bag I had for scraps. "You think they're close?"

"They're testing the fence," Vendetta muttered. "Probably trying to figure out where we're soft." He turned to Ripper. "Go call Snow. See if he can hook us up with a surveillance system around the south gate. Sounds like we need it."

Ripper nodded, already moving. Snow, the Hounds' VP ran an electronic security system in Mercy, which was handy right now. But I knew he really wanted Ripper out of earshot to talk to me in private.

Vendetta looked at me. "Shade--"

"I'm going," I cut in, letting him know there was no way I wasn't.

He studied me for a second. "I need eyes, not a body count."

I didn't say anything. Vendetta had been watching me ever since that night when we took back the club, since I put a bullet in Eli without blinking. No hesitation. No second thoughts. Just the right thing done fast.

Vendetta respected restraint. Hell, I respected him that night. Dylan's uncle or not, Vendetta held the line and kept his cool, even when Eli spat on everything this club ever stood for.

But me? I didn't have that kind of patience. Eli had tried to take down the entire chapter. He was a stain on the Cottonmouth name. He had it coming, and somebody needed to do what everyone else was too damn careful to do.

And Vendetta knew it. At times, he watched me like he was waiting to see which version of me he's going to get: the one who listens, or the one who pulls the trigger and deals with the consequences later.

Either way, I decided maybe I'd be going.

I gave a sharp nod. "You'll get what you need."

He didn't say anything for a long minute, just stared me down. Just when I thought I was getting a lecture, he decided to move on.

“Shade,” he said, voice low. “What’s the one place they’d go where Sinister Skin still has leverage and where two assholes like Creep and Eagle can walk in without raising suspicion?”

I didn’t even have to think. My stomach dropped. “*Ned’s*.”

Vendetta’s expression darkened. “We burned Eli out of here. But we didn’t burn out the cancer.”

No, we hadn’t. We’d been too busy fixing up the joint and helping the Hounds to pay much attention to what was happening outside our walls.

Was *Ned’s* still running girls through the back? Were they still funneling cash to the same bastards Eli crawled to? Were they still poisoning our town with the kind of business Tank fucking died opposing?

“Hold up,” I said. “Eli co-owned the place with Ned. With him gone, who’s running it now?” Everyone knew Ned was a barely functioning alcoholic who was terrible at managing money.

“We need to find out.” Vendetta hooked a thumb in the direction of the front gate. “Gear up. We’re taking a ride.”

A slow, vicious smile curved up my mouth.

“Let’s do it,” I said.

And just like that, we were hunting again.

\*\*\*

## **Jazz**

The whole vibe inside *Ned's Sundown Lounge* had been off tonight from the second I showed up for work. The bar's usual low buzz felt wrong. It was too quiet in some corners, where there were men I'd never seen before talking low at cluttered tables. It was too loud everywhere else, like the regulars were pretending it was a normal Friday night when everyone could feel it wasn't.

And people, mostly men, from both groups kept glancing at the door like they expected trouble.

And then trouble walked in. Two of them. The men, both tall and hard, were covered in ink and shadows. My stomach dropped the moment I saw the patches on their cuts. The familiar coiled serpents stitched in black and bone-white thread on black.

*Cottonmouths.*

I'd heard stories about the notorious motorcycle club since I was a child. Mostly whispered ones from my aunt, Susan, who tried to keep her fear-shaped memories from me and Claire. We heard them anyway.

The night Cottonmouths came to our house was burned into my memory. Three bikers showed up after our mother died and our father had been too high to be scared but not sober enough to protect us. When he

wouldn't hand over the money they claimed he owed them, the leader grabbed me by the jaw and dragged a knife along my cheek. He didn't cut me, but I remember how threatening that cold steel felt gliding down my face. He told my father all the ways he could make a little girl scream in words I'd never forget.

The neighbors called the cops who showed up in time to save me and Claire from whatever would've come next. But I still remembered the man who held that knife, could still clearly picture him in my head. I remembered thinking how wrong it felt that someone so handsome could be that cruel. *Baby Face*. That was the name stitched on his jacket.

Taking a job at *Ned's Sundown Lounge* has been scary enough. *Ned's* was a known Cottonmouth hangout, and the mission I was on to find my sister was exactly why I chose it. But the fear of seeing Baby Face again lingered in my mind every single night I worked at the bar. I prayed that I'd never see him again, which was ridiculous. He wouldn't have remembered the child he threatened that night. He might have laughed at that memory if I ever tried to pass it to him.

But the two Cottonmouths who just walked in were just as scary, and in some ways, worse. Hell, the whole town of Oak Grove had changed so much since my childhood. It got worse every year with all the drugs and guns in its poor neighborhoods. Now people were vanishing. Specifically, girls and young women were vanishing. Girls like my seventeen-year-old sister, Claire.

I froze halfway to my next table, a tray balanced on my palm, and my heart pounding away in my chest. The bigger of the two newcomers was Vendetta. A friend had pointed him out to me once from across the parking lot, whispering the way people did around a campfire telling stories they weren't supposed to repeat.

*He used to be Tank, she'd said. Before they tried to kill him.*

I'd laughed it off back then. Sounded like one of those exaggerated Oak Grove legends. The Cottonmouths loved their tall tales and tales of revenge, and local people passed them around after too many beers. I remembered something about a disagreement inside the club, how a few of his own pissed-off members dragged him out into the woods and left him hanging like a warning. But he didn't die. Apparently, he dragged himself out of the forest and got his revenge.

I'd thought it was just a story... until he moved. Just a subtle turn of his head and I saw it. The twisted ring of scar tissue circling his throat like a macabre necklace.

My blood went cold.

People in Oak Grove said that he shouldn't have been able to come back from that. But he did, then tracked down the club president who gave the order and every friend who stood with him. They said that when he was done, he took the whole damn club for himself.

That's when Tank died and Vendetta was born. With his tall, muscular build, his long hair brushing his shoulders, and that intense, unblinking gaze, he *was* terrifying. Some folks had told the story in *Ned's*, believing he really came back from the dead. I didn't believe that. But with each telling of that tale, the man's legend grew. No one got too close or looked for too long, not unless they were looking for trouble.

And now Vendetta was standing ten feet from me in *Ned's*, on a night that already felt wrong. And trouble was standing right next to him.

He was leaner, blond and quiet. One of the other waitresses told me he was called Shade. The man didn't just look around the bar the way most men did. His gaze swept the bar. His eyes were cold and predatory. He took in faces, threats, and exits. He may not have survived a hanging like his friend, but he looked even more dangerous than Vendetta to me.

And then his gaze found me. It was just one second, one flash of his green-eyed gaze meeting mine, but it felt like someone had reached into my chest and squeezed. I immediately looked away and focused on my next table with my anxiety climbing higher by the second.

Something bad was going down tonight, and the arrival of those two Cottonmouths just confirmed my gut feeling. Every instinct in me screamed to get out. I wanted to walk to the back, grab my bag, and make up some excuse about feeling sick or needing to check on my aunt. Anything to leave the bar *right now* before whatever was building finally snapped.

But guilt held me in place like a hand around my throat. Claire was still missing. If I left... what if tonight was the night someone slipped up? What if I overheard something, one hint, one name, one rumor, that could lead me to her? Every hour I stayed felt like I was standing inside a nightmare, but every hour I left felt like I was abandoning my sister all over again.

So, I stayed, even though every fiber of my being wanted me to run.

My aunt's warning from last week ran through my head again. *Girls go missing in Oak Grove, Jazz. The Cottonmouths are part of the reason why. Don't tangle with them. I don't want to lose you too.*

Tonight, the bar was filled with Cottonmouths, and the latest arrivals very presence seemed to be feeding the fear of everyone who wasn't drunk and halfway paid attention.

Ned, my boss, spotted them from a side table where he was visiting. When he glanced over at them, his eyes widened comically.

*Good. It isn't just me.*

I took orders and scrambled back to the counter, ducking behind it. I j wanted to disappear long enough to breathe, but no luck. Ned was already shuffling in my direction, toward the back hallway with the urgency of a man trying to escape his own execution.

Vendetta caught him by the shirt before he could get any farther. Shade just watched with cool green eyes.

I shouldn't have stared at him. I knew better. I shouldn't have tried to read the man's cold expression.

When his gaze tracked the room again, I realized something he hadn't yet. One of the offices in the back hallway had a light on, its door not fully shut. A shadow moved, showing someone was in there. We were all told to never go back there. Ned was out front in the bar. So, who was back there? Who were they hiding?

Was it someone hiding from Vendetta and Shade? Or was it someone Ned feared even more than the bikers holding him?

Was it them? *Sinister Skin*.

I knew that name just like every girl in Oak Grove did. Sinister Skin showed up last year with a shady tattoo shop on the edge of town. No one thought anything of the grimy little hole-in-the-wall shop at first. Then their presence spread fast, like a cancer. The shop turned into a meeting place. Then the meeting place turned into trafficking rumors. And soon enough, girls started disappearing in patterns nobody wanted to admit were actual patterns.

My aunt Susan was convinced Claire's disappearance had something to do with the Cottonmouths. Call it old prejudice or fear from my father's run-ins with them. But I wasn't so sure. Sinister Skin was newer and bolder.

And *Ned's* was one of the only places in Oak Grove where both groups drifted through after dark. That was why I took the job here in the first place. Not for the tips and certainly not for the company. No, I knew if anyone in this town full of scumbags knew what had happened to my sister, be it the Cottonmouths or Sinister Skin, the bar would be where I'd find them.

My fingers tightened around my tray until they hurt.

Shade's attention shifted to me again, and every instinct in me screamed. *Don't look at him. Don't you dare.* But I did. They were here for a reason, and my gut told me that Ned was only part of it. Were they looking for whoever was in that back office? I couldn't shout a warning. If I did, whoever was hiding back there would know I noticed.

So, I did the smallest, riskiest thing I could manage. I moved my eyes. One shift, slow in the direction of the hallway, the door.

Shade stilled, like a wolf scenting blood. He didn't look away from me. Hell, he didn't even blink.

I froze, terrified and horrified all at once. Why was I trying to help *them*? For all I knew, they had taken my sister or knew what happened to her.

Before I could think another thing about it, the door in question swung open and a man in a tailored shirt stepped out, smiling like a shark.

*Fuck.* It was Rick Earle. The man was Sinister Skin royalty, and he'd been here at least once a day since I started working here. His gaze drifted lazily across the bar, landing on me first. The man's smile widened slowly, as he looked me up and down. Everything about him gave me the creeps.

But that his attention didn't stay on me for long.

Fear rooted me to the spot. I saw Vendetta move in the corner of my eye. It wasn't much. He shifted his weight, taking an intentional step into Earle's line of sight like a wolf stepping out of the shadows. It sent a message. *Look at me, not her.*

Earle's gaze moved to him, and irritation bled into the man's expression. He clocked the cut, the patch, and the man wearing it.

Shade didn't step forward with him. No, he just tilted his head, the way a predator would when it's decided how the kill will go. One corner of his mouth curled up as he studied Earle like a line had been crossed.

What the tipping point was, I couldn't have said. Maybe it was the way Earle's stare lingered on me too long, or the way Ned flinched behind Vendetta. And while it was generally believed that the Cottonmouths and Sinister Skin were in business together, it looked like these two Cottonmouths and Sinister Skin being in the same room were going to end with blood on the floor.

But I watched. For one breath, Shade was still.

The next, his spine straightened, and his shoulders angled in a way that framed Earle as a target. It was quiet, the silent kind of readiness that came from a man who didn't bluff.

And Rick Earle felt it. I saw the exact moment he did. His smile faltered as some realization hit him. The second Earle understood Shade and Vendetta weren't there by accident, I knew with bone-deep certainty that whatever happened next wouldn't be a bar fight.

It was the opening shot of a war.

And I was standing dead center inside it.

\*\*\*

## **Shade**

*Ned's Sundown Lounge* smelled like stale beer, cheap perfume, and the scent of unease that people tried to cover with laughter. It was half bar, half diner, and all trouble, the kind of place where the lights buzzed, your boots stuck to the floor, and every bad decision in Oak Grove passed through at least once. The jukebox played the same tired music low over the speakers. Mostly men clustered at corner tables, with some trying not to draw attention and regulars who looked tight, wary, ready to strike.

We were here to find Ned and get some answers. We needed to make sure the shit Eli left behind didn't choke the rest of the chapter.

Who owned *Ned's* now that Eli, who had co-owned it with Ned, was gone? Was product still being run through it? Did Sinister Skin still have its hooks in the place?

Vendetta wanted clarity, but I wanted confirmation. And both of us wanted the truth before someone tried to bury it.

My gaze swept the place, and that's when I saw her.

Behind the bar, she was sliding a tray onto the counter like she'd done it a thousand times. Hell, maybe she had. But why the hell would a woman who looked like *her* be working in a place like this? Did she have a damn death wish? Her long, dark hair was pulled back into a messy braid, and a couple of loose strands brushed against her pale skin as she moved.

When she walked out from behind the bar, her body was all soft curves and long limbs. Her black tank top was too small, and her jeans fit like a second skin. *Holy hell.*

She must've felt the weight of my stare, because she stopped mid-step and looked up. Her wide eyes were the color of good bourbon. *Damn.*

But the look she gave me wasn't curiosity. No, it was *fear*. Not the kind women usually showed, with interest first, then nerves. No, that look told me she already built a story in mind about who I was.

A Cottonmouth. One of the men who not only ran *Ned's* but Oak Grove. For all she knew, I was one of the monsters behind everything wrong in Oak Grove right now. The chapter under Eli's leadership had really fucked things up.

She tore her gaze away fast, like looking at me too long might get her hurt. She approached a table of younger Cottonmouths, prospects and half-drunk idiots leering at her like a damn buffet. She forced a smile, but it was thin and brittle.

It was obvious that she hated being here. And the minute she saw me, she hated *me* too. Whoever she was, she didn't belong in *Ned's*. Especially not with Sinister Skin poking its claws back into Oak Grove.

Just one word came to mind as I watched her. *Mine*. It was instinct, the kind that didn't miss and wouldn't fade.

Ned spotted us the moment we walked in. I watched recognition hit him like a punch to the gut. His face went pale first, then his shoulders curled in, like he was trying to make himself small enough to disappear behind the bar taps. His gaze darted from Vendetta to me and back again, wide and frantic. It was the look of a man who *knew* he'd been living on borrowed time and had just found the collectors at his door.

He fumbled a glass, nearly dropped it, then muttered something to a customer. He started backing away, step by step, like he could sneak out of his own bar without us noticing.

*Coward.* Or maybe just smart enough to know the shit Eli left behind was finally circling back.

Vendetta snapped my attention back with a jerk of his chin toward the hallway. Ned was slinking off like a weasel caught stealing chickens.

"Let's go," he murmured.

I followed, but not before checking on the girl again, and that's when she looked at me. Really looked. Yeah, she was still scared of me but also scared of something else. Her gaze shifted sideways, once. The movement was quick and sharp.

She'd looked in the direction of the hallway, and I knew there were a couple of offices back there. Was someone there?

I caught the message instantly. Vendetta did too.

We stepped in closer, cutting off Ned's retreat. Vendetta grabbed him by the shirt and slammed him against the wall to hold him in place. The man looked terrified in his clutches.

"Thought we said you were done with surprises," Vendetta said, voice low.

Ned choked on air. "I didn't —"

From that back hallway, Rick Earle stepped out like he owned the place. The man was a higher-up in Sinister Skin. He had a smile like a

shark, and his eyes were dark and cold. His suit was expensive, tailored, and he had a watch that looked like it cost more than my bike.

He looked at the girl first. That was his *first* mistake. The bastard stared a little too long, his mouth curling like he had plans for her.

Then he spotted Vendetta. His whole face changed then, flashing recognition, fury, and fear. Earle had good reason for that.

Vendetta was the man who had broken into a lake house at the edge of Oak Grove one night where Earle had Eli Crizer's niece, Dylan, right where he wanted her. He'd put Earle in a hospital bed for weeks. It was generous that Vendetta left him alive considering what the fucker could have done to Dylan, who was now Vendetta's old lady.

But now fate had brought Earle back to the man who ripped out the Oak Grove chapter of the Cottonmouths by the roots after they'd crawled into bed with Sinister Skin.

Vendetta stood ten feet from Earle, calm as ever, with Ned still in his clutches. He shoved Ned behind him, turning his full attention to the other man.

"Well," Earle said, sounding more confident than he looked. "Didn't expect to see *you* back here."

Vendetta's smile was lazy and lethal. "We're full of surprises."

The new tension in the bar drew more than a few eyes. Some of the conversation and noise died down.

Earle cut me a look before returning his attention to Vendetta, calculating fast. He wasn't stupid. He knew he couldn't win a stand-off with both of us. Not here, in public. Not without bodies hitting the floor before he ever reached the door.

Still, the sumbitch was proud. And men like him got dangerous when pride and fear collided.

"You're trespassing," Earle said, trying to stare Vendetta down. "This is Sinister Skin territory."

Vendetta let his gaze drift around the bar like he was taking inventory.

"Funny," he drawled. Vendetta tapped his own patch with two fingers, slow and mocking. "I see several Cottonmouths in here."

I did too. And it pissed me off.

The fact that *any* of our boys were still drinking in this place was a fucking problem. Eli's poison should've cleared the second we burned his name off the roster. But there they were, three of them at a back table, hunched over beers like they didn't notice the snakes coiled in the shadows around them. Two older members were at the bar.

Why were they here? What deals were they turning a blind eye to? And more importantly, who were they loyal to *now*?

My gaze cut across them one by one, burning their faces into my memory. They'd be having conversations with me later. And they weren't going to enjoy a single second of them.

"And last I checked," Vendetta said, "Eli co-owned this place with Ned."

Earle shook his head. "Not anymore."

Vendetta arched a brow. "Is that right?"

"We bought Ned out," Earle said. "Paperwork's done. The keys are in our hands. You're standing in a Sinister Skin operation."

The words hit exactly where I expected them to. It was what I'd come here to confirm.

Eli's rot hadn't just infected the club. It had rooted itself into the damn town, right under everyone's noses. And Ned had sold out the second Eli's body hit the dirt.

I felt the shift roll through me. We weren't just cleaning up loose ends. We were taking back territory.

Earle, like an idiot, kept talking, trying to fill the silence. "And *you* are still on the line for what Eli promised us."

Vendetta cut him off with a smile that wasn't a smile at all. "You had a deal with Eli. Eli's dead. So is your deal."

Earle smirked then but it didn't reach his eyes. "Oh, is *that* how this works? Eli gets dead and suddenly you boys think everything he promised just... disappears?" He took a slow, deliberate step forward. "You think killing him makes it all go away?"

Vendetta didn't answer.

The man just laughed, amused in a way that made every hair on the back of my neck rise. Like he was genuinely fucking entertained by the idea.

Vendetta shook his head. "I didn't kill Eli."

Earle froze.

I stepped forward just enough for the man to feel it. "I did."

His gaze flashed to me, and he was smart enough to look worried then. But he kept talking, like a man trying to convince himself he still had leverage.

"Eli put the club on the line for the agreement," Earle hissed. "What he owed, *you* owe. His death doesn't change shit. You can't just walk in here and erase it."

Vendetta tilted his head, the faintest smile touching his mouth.  
“Watch me.”

Earle swallowed hard. He knew exactly what that meant, just like he knew exactly what kind of men he was dealing with.

Neither Vendetta nor I moved. The girl stood frozen behind the counter, taking all of it in with wide eyes and shaking hands. Hell, the bar itself seemed to hold its breath.

Finally, Rick Earle lifted his hands, a mockery of surrender. His hands weren't all that steady either. “This isn't the night, fellas,” he said nervously. “But it's coming. All of you Cottonmouth motherfuckers owe a debt. And we *will* come to collect sooner or later.”

Vendetta smiled like he couldn't wait.

Earle stepped backward, never turning his back, his eyes cutting from Vendetta to me to the girl one last time, longer than I liked. Then he slipped out the back door, a couple of his men trailing after him like rats abandoning a kitchen.

Ned still stood behind Vendetta, looking like he just might pass out.

I looked at the girl again. She was still staring at us in shock, maybe relief. I still wanted to know why the hell she was even in *Ned's*.

Vendetta moved closer, clapped my shoulder. "You see the way Earle looked at her?"

"I saw everything," I said. And I did. Earle's interest and the threat it posed to her.

Vendetta's gaze sharpened. "We're taking her home."

I didn't argue or question him. The way Earle looked at her? She'd be gone by morning, caught in their nets.

I'd already made up my mind the moment I saw her.

*Mine.*