

Excerpt: Reaper's Property

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Prologue

Readers aged 18 and older only, please.

Sept. 17—Present Day

Eastern Washington, Yakima Valley

Crap, there were bikes outside the trailer.

Three Harleys and a big, maroon truck I didn't recognize.

Good thing I'd stopped by the grocery store on the way home. It had already been a long day and the last thing I wanted to do was to run out and buy even more food, but the guys always wanted to eat. Jeff hadn't given me any extra beer money and I didn't want to ask him—not with his money troubles. It wasn't like I paid rent. For a guy whose entire mission in life was to smoke pot and play video games, my brother Jeff had done a lot for me over the past three months. I owed him and I knew it.

I'd already grabbed some beer and ground beef that'd been on sale. I'd planned on burgers, buns and chips for the two of us, but I always made extra, for leftovers. Gabby had given me a watermelon she'd picked up in Hermiston that weekend. I even had a big potato salad all made up for the potluck after work tomorrow. I'd have to stay up late making another one but I could handle that.

I smiled, thankful something in my life was going right. Less than a minute to plan and I'd figured out a meal—might not be gourmet, but it wouldn't embarrass Jeff, either.

I pulled up next to the bikes, careful to leave them plenty of room. I'd been terrified of the Reapers the first time they'd come over. Anyone would be. They looked like criminals, all tattooed and wearing black leather vests covered in patches. They cussed and drank and could be rude and demanding, but they'd never stolen or broken anything. Jeff had warned me about them lots of times but he also considered them friends. I'd decided he was exaggerating about the danger, for the most part. I mean Horse was dangerous enough, but not because of any criminal activity...

Anyway, I think Jeff did some web design for them or something. Some kind of business. Why a motorcycle club needed a website I had no idea, and the one time I'd asked him about it he told me not to ask.

Then he'd scuttled off to the casino for two days.

I got out of the car and went around back to grab the groceries, almost scared to see whether Horse's bike was in the lineup. I wanted to see him so bad it hurt but wasn't sure what I'd say if I did. It's not like he'd answered my text messages. But I couldn't help myself, I had to check for him, so I grabbed my groceries and walked over to the bikes to scope them out before going inside.

I don't know much about bikes, but I knew enough to recognize his. It's big and sleek and black. Not all bright and decorated the way you sometimes see bikes on the freeway. Just big and fast, with giant, fat tailpipes off the back and more testosterone than should be legal.

The motorcycle was almost as beautiful as the man who rode it. Almost.

My heart stopped when I saw that bike, right on the end. I wanted to touch it, see if the leather of the seat was as smooth as I remembered, but I wasn't stupid enough to do that. I didn't have the right. I really shouldn't even be excited to see him, but I felt a rush knowing he was right inside my trailer. Things weren't smooth between

us and I honestly didn't know if he'd even acknowledge me. For a while he'd seemed almost like my boyfriend. The last time I'd seen him, he'd scared the crap out of me.

Even scary, the man made my panties wet.

Tall, built, with shoulder-length hair he kept pulled back in a ponytail, and thick black stubble on his face. Stark, tribal cuffs ringed his wrists and upper arms. And what a face... Horse was handsome, like movie star handsome. I'd bet he had women coming out his ears, and the fact that he'd spent more than one night in my bed made me all too aware that his beauty wasn't just above the belt. The thought of his below-belt assets led to a brief but intense fantasy about him, me, my bed and some chocolate syrup.

Yum.

Shit. Dessert. I needed dessert for tonight. Horse loved sweets. Were there any chocolate chips? I could do cookies, so long as there was enough butter. Please don't let him be pissed at me, I prayed silently, even though I was pretty sure God wasn't interested in prayers where the promise of fornication played such a prominent role. I reached the door and juggled the bags, sliding most of them onto my right arm so I could turn the handle. I walked in and looked around the living room.

Then I screamed.

My baby brother knelt in the center of the room, beaten raw and dripping blood all over the carpet. Four men wearing Reapers' cuts stood around him. Picnic, Horse and two I didn't know—a big, built hunk of a man with a mohawk, tattoos on his skull and about a thousand piercings, and another who was tall and cut, with light blond hair in short spikes. Horse studied me with the same cool, almost blank expression he wore when we first met. Detached.

Picnic studied me too. He was tall with short, dark hair that looked far too stylish to be on a biker and bright blue eyes that pierced right through a girl—I'd met him at least five times. He was the club president. He had a great sense of humor, carried pictures of his two teenage girls to flash whenever he got the slightest opportunity and had helped me shuck corn the last time he'd come to visit.

Oh, and he also stood right behind my brother with a gun pointed at the back of his head.

Chapter One

June 16

Twelve weeks earlier

“Marie, you did the right thing,” Jeff said, holding an ice pack to my cheek. “That cocksucker deserves to die. You will never, ever regret leaving him.”

“I know,” I replied, miserable. He was right—why hadn’t I left Gary earlier? We’d been high school sweethearts, married at nineteen and by the time I hit twenty I already knew I’d made a terrible mistake. It took until now, five years later, to realize just how terrible.

Today he’d backhanded me right across the face.

After that, it only took another ten minutes to do what I hadn’t managed in all our time together. I threw my clothes in my suitcase and left his abusive, cheating ass.

“I’m kind of glad he did it,” I said, looking down at the scarred formica table in my mom’s trailer. She was taking a little vacation at the moment in jail. Mom’s life is complicated.

“What the fuck, Marie?” Jeff asked, shaking his head. “You’re fucked in the head, talking like that.”

My brother loved me, but he wasn’t exactly a poet. I offered him a wan smile.

“I stayed with him for way too long, just taking it. I think I might have stayed forever. But when he hit me, it’s like it woke me up. I went from being terrified of

leaving to just not caring anymore. Honestly, I don't care, Jeff. He can keep everything—the furniture, the stereo, all that shit. I'm just glad to get out.”

“Well, you can stay here as long as you need to,” he said, gesturing around the singlewide. It was small and dank and smelled kind of like pot and dirty laundry, but I felt safe here. This had been my home for most of my life, and while it might not have been a picture-perfect childhood, it hadn't been too bad for a couple of white trash kids whose dad took off before they hit grade school.

Well, good until mom blew out her back and started drinking. Things went downhill after that. I looked around the singlewide, trying to think. How was this going to work?

“I don't have any money,” I said. “I can't pay you rent. Not until I get a job. Gary never put my name on the bank account.”

“What the fuck, Marie? Rent?” Jeff asked again, shaking his head. “This is your house, too. I mean, it's shithole, but it's our shithole. You don't pay rent here.”

I smiled at him, a real smile this time. Jeff might be a stoner who spent ninety percent of his life playing video games, but he had a heart. Suddenly I felt such incredible love for him that I couldn't keep it in. I dropped the ice and launched myself at him, giving him a fierce hug. He wrapped his arms around me awkwardly, returning it even though I could tell it confused and frightened him a little.

We've never been a touchy-feely kind of family.

“I love you, Jeff,” I said.

“Um, yeah,” he muttered, pulling away from me nervously, but he wore a little smile. He walked over to the counter, opened a drawer and pulled out a little glass pipe and a baggie of weed.

“You want some?” he asked. Yup, Jeff loved me. He didn't share with just anyone. I laughed and shook my head.

“Pass. I've gotta start job hunting tomorrow morning. Don't want to flunk a drug test.”

He shrugged and walked into the living room—which was also the dining room, the entryway and the hallway—to sit on the couch. A second later his ginormous big-screen TV flickered to life. He clicked through the channels until he hit wrestling, not the sport but the kind where they wear funny costumes and it's like a soap opera. Gary was probably watching the same thing back at our house. Jeff took a couple hits and then set down the pipe and his favorite death's-head Zippo on the coffee table. Then he grabbed his laptop and flipped it open.

I grinned.

Jeff'd always been the shit when it came to computers. I had no idea what he did to earn money—although I suspected he did as little of it as he could get away with and not starve. Most people, Gary included, thought he was a loser. Maybe he was. But I didn't care, because whenever I'd needed him, he'd been there for me. And I'll always be here for him, I promised myself. Starting by getting the place cleaned up and buying some real food. So far as I could tell, the man lived on pizza, Cheetos and peanut butter.

Some things never changed.

It took a lot of work to get the trailer clean but I enjoyed every minute of it. I missed mom, of course, but I have to admit (if only to myself) that the place was a lot more comfortable without her around. She's a terrible cook, she keeps the shades closed, and she never flushes the toilet.

Oh, and everything she touches turns to utter chaos and drama.

Jeff doesn't flush the toilet either, but for some reason it didn't bother me as much. Probably because he'd not only given me the bigger bedroom, he'd also shoved a surprisingly large wad of bills into my purse that first morning and kissed me on the forehead for luck when I went out job hunting. I needed to find work despite sporting a nasty bruise on my face from Gary's little love tap.

"You're gonna kick ass, sis," Jeff said, rubbing his eyes. I was touched he'd gotten out of bed to see me off. He wasn't exactly a morning person. "Buy me some beer on the way home? And some of those coffee filter thingies... I ran out, and now I'm outta paper towels, too. I don't know if TP will cut it and I need my caffeine."

I winced.

"I'll take care of the shopping," I said quickly. "And the cooking," I added, glancing toward the kitchen sink, which was piled high with dishes. And pots. And something green that might just hold the cure for cancer...

"Great," he muttered, then turned and stumbled back toward his room.

Now it was two weeks later and things were looking up. For one, I'd made enough progress in the house that I wasn't afraid to sit on the toilet any longer, or use the shower. My next project was the yard, which hadn't been mowed in at least two years. I'd also gotten a job at the Little Britches Daycare, which was run by my old friend Cara's mom, Denise. Cara and I had fallen out of touch when she'd gone to college, but I'd seen her mom around occasionally and always asked after her. Cara'd worked her way through law school and had a job in New York at some hot-shit firm. Her mom showed me pictures sometimes and Cara looked like a TV lawyer to me, all designer suits and fancy shoes.

Not me, though. I'd had grades as good as hers, but I'd been in loooooove with Gary, so I blew off college. Great thinking.

Anyway, Denise asked cautiously if I was still with Gary, eyeing the foundation I'd spackled over my bruise. I told her about my new living arrangements and that was that.

So I had a job now and while it didn't pay much, I liked working with the kids and had even started doing some babysitting in the evenings for different families who brought their children to Little Britches during the day. Jeff loved having me around because I cooked and cleaned and did the laundry. I'd done all that for Gary, too, but he never said thanks.

Nope, he just bitched about how I'd done it wrong.

Then he'd gone off and fucked his whore.

I got off work at three that day, so I came home and made bread. Over the years I've perfected my technique—I start with a basic French bread recipe, but I add a ton of garlic, Italian herbs, five different kinds of cheeses and an egg-white glaze. The recipe makes two big loaves and I planned to serve it with spaghetti topped with fresh tomatoes from Denise's garden and my signature spinach salad. Of course we couldn't even come close to eating that much bread, but I planned to take the second loaf to work tomorrow for the girls.

Denise had a huge garden behind the center, and she'd told me to help myself. I planned to take advantage of it as much as I could before the season turned. I had this fantasy that I'd do some canning but it probably wasn't realistic. I'd left all my equipment at Gary's place, and I wasn't ready to go back there. He hadn't gotten in touch with me since I left (which made me happy), and I'd heard around town that he'd already moved Misty Carpenter into our bed (which made me want to puke).

I liked to think of Misty as THE WHORE, which I wrote in all caps for all emphasis whenever I texted someone.

I set the bread out to rise on a tray on our old picnic table outside and decided to get going on the weeds around the porch. It was hot, so I popped on a bikini top (which I must say, I filled out nicely, despite my smallish cup size). I grabbed some old work gloves I'd found in the shed and poured myself some iced tea, rolling down the windows on my car so could I blast the radio. Then I set out to commit some serious acts of violence against all weed-kind.

Half an hour later the weeds seemed to be winning so I decided to take a break. I climbed up on top of the picnic table, resting my feet on the bench seat on one side and laying back with my arms over my head, dangling off the far side. It felt fantastic to be so relaxed and free in my own yard without a care in the world.

Naturally, that's when all the bikers showed up.

I heard them coming, of course, although not as early as you'd think—I had the music cranked pretty high. I didn't realize we had company until they were about halfway down our long driveway, which wound through our landlord's orchard. I sat up and leaned back on my hands as they pulled closer, dumbfounded. Usually I liked the fact that we lived in the middle of nowhere without neighbors. Now I felt very alone.

Who were these guys?

I didn't occur to me that I was glistening with sweat and wearing a bikini top until they turned off the bikes, pulled off their helmets and turned to scope me out. To make my own personal cliché perfect, Def Leppard's Pour Some Sugar on Me blasted through the radio. I winced—I must look like a white trash princess from hell, basking outside my trailer in a bikini to outdated butt rock. I actually felt their eyes crawling over me, and while all three seemed to appreciate the view, it was the one in the middle who really caught my attention. The man was big. I don't just mean tall (which he was—he had to be nearly six and a half feet compared to my petite five foot four), but large. Broad shoulders, muscular arms with tattooed tribal cuffs around his wrists and biceps. I'd bet I couldn't put my two hands around those arms, and thick thighs I wanted to squeeze...and maybe lick.

He got off his bike and walked toward me, eyes holding mine hostage. I felt a startling flush of warmth between my legs. I'd gone a long time without feeling sexual at all, to be honest. The last few years with Gary had been frustrating at best and painful at worst. But something about the way this biker swaggered, taking up

space and the very air around him with his presence, caught me off guard and knocked me right in the...

Well, you know.

My nipples hardened and I swayed a little as he stopped, reaching out with one finger to trace my collarbone from my shoulder inward, then running it down between my breasts, grazing the sides. He raised it to his mouth, tasting my sweat. He smelled like motor oil and sex.

Holy shit.

“Hey, sweet butt,” he said. That broke the spell. Sweet butt? What the hell kind of guy called a girl he’d never met something like that? “Your man here? We need to talk.”

I scrambled backward off the table, away from him, nearly falling off in the process. The music stopped abruptly, and I glanced away from him to see that one of his buddies had reached into my car and pulled out my car keys. He put them in his pocket. Uh oh.

“You mean Jeff? He’s in town,” I replied, trying to compose myself. Shit, should I have admitted I was alone? I really didn’t have a choice. I mean, I could have said I needed to go get Jeff from inside and then locked the door, but the trailer was thirty years old. The deadbolt had been rusted shut since I was a kid. Not to mention that they had my keys. “Why don’t you wait out here while I call him?”

The big man studied me, his face cold and expressionless. I couldn’t be entirely sure he was human, I decided. More like a Terminator. Unwilling to hold his gaze, I let my eyes drop to his vest. Beat to hell, black leather, lots of patches. One of them caught my attention in particular, a bright red diamond that had a number one and with a percent sign next to it. I didn’t know what it meant, but I was pretty sure I wanted to get into the house and put on some more clothing.

Maybe a burkha.

“Sure thing, babe,” he said, straddling the table’s bench and taking a seat. His friends sauntered over to join him.

“How about a drink, girl?” one of them asked, a tall man with short dark hair and startling blue eyes. I nodded and walked quickly toward the trailer, using every bit of my self-control not to break into a run. I heard them laughing behind me. Not a friendly laugh.

Thankfully, Jeff actually answered his phone on the first try.

“There are some guys here to see you,” I said, peeking out through the kitchen window, careful to keep the faded curtains decorated with pictures of little flying vegetables closed. “They’re bikers. I think they might be dangerous. They look like murderers to me, but I’d like to think I’m crazy on this one. Tell me I’m being paranoid, please.”

“Fuck...” Jeff replied. “That’s the Reapers MC, Marie, and they don’t fuck around. Do what they say, but don’t get too close to them. Whatever you do, don’t touch them or talk to them unless they talk to you first. Don’t even look at them. Just stay the hell out of their way. I’ll be home in twenty minutes.”

“What’s an MC?”

“Motorcycle club. Stay calm, okay?”

Jeff hung up on me.

Now I was really scared. I’d expected him to laugh at me, and tell me they were just harmless guys who liked to ride their bikes and play badass. I guess this was the real thing. I ran into my room and pulled on a baggy t-shirt I liked to sleep in. I dropped my shorts and put on a pair of capris, pulling my long, dark-brown hair back into a messy bun. A quick look in the mirror was enough to convince me that I was worrying too much—they might have been crude and suggestive toward me, but I was no man’s dream girl. I had dirt smudges on my face, my nose had burned bright red and I’d somehow gotten a giant scratch across my cheek. It contrasted nicely with the fading yellow and purple of the bruise Gary’d given me.

My hands trembled as I poured three big plastic tumblers of iced tea, wondering if I should put sugar in them. I decided to bring some sugar in a cup and stuck a spoon in it. Then I wedged two of the tumblers between my right arm and my torso, grabbing the third with my hand. I snagged the sugar with my left and managed to get through the door with some careful maneuvering. They were talking to each other in low voices when I came out, watching me as I walked to the table. I pasted a bright smile on my face, just like I used to wear when I waitressed back in high school. I could do this.

“You call your man?” the big one asked. I glanced at him, forgetting I was supposed to avoid his gaze because his eyes were so deep and rich and green.

“My man?” I asked.

“Jensen.”

Shit, I forgot about that. They thought I was Jeff’s girlfriend. Should I tell them? I couldn’t decide. I studied the biker, trying to figure out the safest answer. He met my gaze without giving anything away. His hair was pulled back in a rough ponytail and his chin was covered with thick, dark stubble. My stupid body came alert again as I wondered what that stubble would feel like if I rubbed my lips against it slowly.

Probably pretty damned good.

“Girlie, answer the fuckin’ question,” said the blue-eyed man. I jumped, splashing some of the tea against the front of my shirt. It drenched my right boob, of course, and my nipple came to instant attention when the icy drink hit it. The big guy’s eyes followed it, his eyes darkening.

“Jeff’s coming,” I said, managing not to stutter. “He said he’d be here in twenty minutes. I’ve got tea for you,” I added inanely. Big Guy reached out and took the cup from my hand. That left me in a bind because I couldn’t unload the other two glasses without my other hand free. I could either give him the sugar or I could lean past him and put it on the table. I was pretty sure I didn’t want to do that.

He solved the problem for me, reaching out again and wrapping his fingers around one of the cups I held clasped against my body. I felt all sorts of tingles as they slid between the cold plastic and my skin, standing frozen as he repeated the gesture. Then he took the sugar. He caught my hand and pulled me up against his thigh, until my stomach almost touched his face.

I couldn't breathe.

He reached up to take my chin, turning my face so he could study the bruise. I held my breath, willing him not to ask me about it. He didn't. Instead, he dropped his hand to my waist, rubbing down and up slowly along the curve of my hip. It took everything I had not to lean in push my breasts into his face.

"Jensen do that to you?"

Dammit. I had to tell them, I couldn't let it look like Jeff hurt me. He didn't deserve that.

"No, he'd never do that. Jeff's my brother," I said quickly, jerking away, blushing. Then I turned and ran into the house.

They sat at the table drinking their tea and talking until Jeff got home. It felt like he took hours, even though he made it in record time. At one point the big guy reached over and peeked under the towel covering the bread dough, which was in danger of rising way too high if I didn't get it into the oven soon.

Crap.

I wasn't going out there, though. Not until they were gone.

Unfortunately, they didn't seem to be in the mood to leave. When Jeff rolled up in his aging Firebird they all stood around and talked for a while. Then they got up and walked toward our front door. Big Guy glanced toward my window and even though I knew he couldn't possibly see me, his eyes seemed to lock on mine.

As they came inside, Jeff was smiling and looking relaxed. The others were, too. Everything was friendly and I frowned, wondering if I'd imagined just how serious he'd been with me on the phone.

“Sis, my associates are going to stay for dinner,” he announced grandly. “You better go get your bread, I think it’s done rising. You guys are gonna love this, Marie’s bread is amazing. She’ll fix you a fuckin’ great dinner.”

I smiled at him a little shakily, cussing him out in my head. What the hell? Sure, I cooked for him, but I didn’t want to cook for this group. They scared me, which combined oddly with my disobedient body’s desire to jump Big Guy’s bones. I couldn’t think of a way out of it, though, not without breaking our little pretense that there was nothing weird about three scary biker dudes showing up out of nowhere.

Not only that, the bread would be ruined if I didn’t cook it soon. I had spaghetti sauce simmering on the stove and it smelled amazing. I couldn’t even claim it was too hot to use the oven, because we had a couple of those little window air conditioners chugging along like the Little Engine That Could, so the interior was pretty comfortable. The men settled themselves in the living room, except for Big Guy, who pulled out one of the stools at the kitchen bar, which was also our table. He sat down, leaning back against the wall comfortably, arms crossed in front of him.

He’d be able to watch me cook the whole time while still following the action in the living room.

I ran out to get the bread while Jeff turned on the TV. When I got back there was some kind of fighting on. Not wrestling this time, but real fighting in some sort of cage.

“Grab us some beers, sweet butt,” said the third guy, a dark-haired man with slightly pock-marked cheeks. I bit my lip. I really didn’t like being called that. Not only was it degrading, there was some sort of nasty implication in the way he said it. But Jeff glanced up at me and mouthed “please”, so I set down the bread, went to the fridge and pulled out four beers. They ignored me for the most part while I fixed dinner, except for my Big Guy. Every few minutes I’d look up to find him watching me, pensive. He didn’t smile, he didn’t talk to me, nothing. Just studied me, with special attention for my boobs (smaller than some but perkier than most) and ass (slightly larger than I’d like).

I grabbed a beer for myself, relaxing after a while and rolling with it. I supposed I should be indignant that he just sat there, blatantly checking me out, but it felt kind of good to have a man appreciate me.

It'd been a long time.

By the time I pulled the bread out of the oven the fight on TV had ended. I set out some hot pads for the pasta and sauce and grabbed the salad. The guys fell on the food like a bunch of starving animals.

"This is amazing," the man with blue eyes said, as if seeing me as a person for the first time. He had strong, sculpted features and I decided he was pretty hot for an old guy. "You can really cook. My old lady used to cook like this."

"Thanks," I said, hoping I wasn't blushing. This might go down as the oddest dinner party of my life, but I loved to cook for people who appreciated good food. In fact, during high school I'd planned on going to culinary school.

Thanks for nothing, Gary.

Big Guy didn't say anything, but I noticed he took seconds and then thirds of everything. While they finished, I started cleaning up, but he reached across the bar and grabbed my arm.

"You might want to go for a drive," he said, jerking his chin toward the door. "We've got business."

I glanced over at Jeff, who offered me a placating smile.

"Do you mind, sis?" he asked. I shook my head, although I felt a twinge at leaving without even learning their names. Somehow over the course of dinner they'd stopped scaring me, turning alarmingly human. I knew when I wasn't wanted though, and I owed it to Jeff not to cause trouble. I smiled brightly at everyone and went to the door, grabbing my purse off the rack next to it.

"Well, nice to meet all of you, um..."

Mr. Blue Eyes, who I noticed had the word "President" written on his vest, grinned.

"I'm Picnic, and these are my brothers, Horse and Max," he said.

I glanced over at Big Guy. Horse? What kind of name was that? And they really didn't look like brothers...

"Nice to meet you, Mr. Picnic," I said, holding back my questions.

"Just Picnic. Thanks again for the food."

Horse stood.

"I'll walk you out to your car," he said, his voice low and rumbling. Jeff's eyes opened wide, and he jerked his head, then stilled. Picnic smirked at me knowingly.

"Take your time, we can wait," he said to Horse, reaching down and pulling my keys out of his pocket, tossing them to me. I walked out into the warm sun of the late-summer evening, Horse following me. He snagged my hand, leading me to the table. My heart raced with every step. I had no idea what was about to happen, but part of me really wanted him to touch me.

Maybe.

Probably not.

Shit.

Horse tucked his hands under my arms, popping me up onto the table. Then he slid them down my sides, wedging them between my legs and pushing my knees gently apart. He stepped between them and leaned into me.

I'm pretty sure I came close to stroking out.

"I don't think this is a good idea," I said, glancing back at the house, heart hammering. Jeff wouldn't like it. Horse was dangerous. I could smell it on him. Seriously. Under the delicious scent of leather, light sweat and man was a pungent strain of pure trouble. "I mean, everyone is waiting for you, right? I can just go, let's just forget this, okay?"

He didn't say anything, just studying me with that cool, expressionless face of his.

“That how you gonna play it, sweet butt?”

“I’m not your sweet butt,” I snapped, narrowing my eyes. I hated getting called things like that, Gary did it all the time. Why did they keep calling me that?

To hell with him and to hell with Gary, too.

Men.

“Fuck off,” I said, glaring at him.

Horse gave a bark of laughter, the sound sudden and loud in the silence, which pulled me back to reality. His hands tucked around my waist, jerking me into his body where my crotch immediately came up against what had to be a pretty healthy erection.

He swiveled his hips into mine, slowly dragging it up and across my clit. I’m ashamed to admit that I creamed my pants right then and there instead of kicking him in the nuts like a sensible girl. He leaned over and I held my breath, waiting for him to kiss me. Instead he whispered in my ear.

“Nice ass. Sweet. Butt.”

I didn’t like his tone, so I bit his ear. Hard.

He jumped back, and I wondered if he was going to kill me. Instead he started laughing so hard I thought he might pull a muscle. I scowled, and he held up his arms to each side in pointed surrender.

“I get it, hands off,” he said, shaking his head, bemused. “Play it the way you like. And you’re right, we’ve got business. Go drive for an hour, that should be enough time.”

I slid off the table and darted around him. He trailed me as I went to my car. I opened the door and almost got in, then the same stupid streak of curiosity that’d caused me trouble all my life drowned out my sense of self-preservation. I stopped in the doorway, looking at him across the roof.

“Horse isn’t your real name, is it?”

He smiled at me, his teeth white in the darkness, like a wolf’s.

“Road name,” he replied, leaning against the roof of my car. “That’s the way things work in my world. Citizens have names. We have road names.”

“What does that mean?”

“People give them to you when you start riding,” he said casually. “They can mean all kinds of things. Picnic got his name because he went all out planning some pansy-assed picnic for a bitch who had him twisted up in knots. She ate his food and drank his booze, then called her fuckwad boyfriend to come and pick her up while he took a leak.”

I grimaced at his crudity, trying to understand.

“That seems... unpleasant. Why would he want to remember that?”

“Because when the fuckwad showed up, Picnic shoved his head through a picnic table.”

I caught my breath. That didn’t sound good. I wanted to ask if the guy had been all right, but decided I probably didn’t want to know the answer.

“And Max?”

“When he gets drunk, sometimes his eyes go all wide and he looks fuckin’ crazy, like Mad Max.”

“I see,” I replied, thinking about the man. I guess he did look sort of like Mad Max... I decided I didn’t want to see him drunk.

Silence hung heavy between us.

“So aren’t you gonna ask?”

I studied him, narrowing my eyes. I had a bad feeling about this. But the words came out of my mouth, completely beyond my control.

“So why are you called Horse?”

“Cause I’m hung like one,” he replied, smirking.

I dropped down into my car and slammed the door shut. I heard him laughing through the open window as I peeled out of the driveway.

Visit www.joannawylde.com to order *Reaper’s Property*.