



DUTCH

*Surprise
Baby*

SAVAGE LEGION MC

ARIA RAY

Dutch's Surprise Baby
Savage Legion MC, Book 3

Aria Ray

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Savage Legion MC

Book 3 - Dutch's Surprise Baby

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About the Book

Figured my major screw-up was losing Joy, but it was losing that precious secret she cradled in her belly. Now she's back, and I'll guard her and my little dude 'til my last wicked beat.

Despite being much older than Joy, I was damn sure we were meant to ride together. Then, she vanished, leaving me with just a quick note and a shattered heart.

Didn't sit right, but I respected her call. Spent years trying to roll on, but it was like cruisin' on a flat tire.

Now, six years later, she's back, weavin' apologies and cryin' a river of sorrow. Says she's dodgin' a high-and-mighty madman and his watchdogs.

I ain't fully buyin' her story, but I can't slam the door on her plea. Truth is, Joy's still locked tight in my heart...

So, I saddle up to be the protector she needs.

And when I uncover her most guarded secret, I swear never to let her slip from my grasp again.

“Savage Legion MC” Series:

[Rider's Secret](#) (Prequel)

[Siege's Twins](#) (Book 1)

[Tank's Unexpected Child](#) (Book 2)

[Dutch's Surprise Baby](#) (Book 3)

[Rig's Ward](#) (Book 4)

Chapter 1

Joy

Six Years Ago

I wake when Dutch slides out of the bed. He's got to go to work early this morning, but I'm too exhausted by all that amazing sex we had last night to drag myself out of bed just yet. I turn on my side so I can watch him when he walks to the shower buck naked. This man of mine has a mighty fine ass, among other body parts. Truth be told, this is my favorite part of the morning.

I can tell Dutch hated getting out of bed as well this morning because he waited until his alarm went off three times. My handsome boyfriend has never done that before. Normally, he rolls out of bed raring to go. I swear, the man has the energy of someone half his age.

I'm thrilled when he strolls back into the room, his sexy body glistening with droplets of water from his quick shower and a towel slung low on his waist. Dutch is an inked god and I love looking at him. He glances at me as he pulls his drawer open and grabs a t-shirt and pair of jeans.

"You look like a woman who likes what she sees."

I sit up and pull the warm blanket up under my chin as I look my fill. "Oh, I do. You're the most attractive man I've ever had the good fortune of dating."

"Dated a lot, have you?" he comments without looking at me as he steps into his pants.

I shoot him a disapproving look. "You know better than to get jealous of the faceless horde of men who came before you."

He zips his pants, pulls his shirt onto his still wet body, and flips his wet hair out of his face. "I know," he responds grudgingly. "I don't like to think

of other men having all your smiles, though.”

I can't help but chuckle. “Well, if it helps, I was frowning at most of them.”

He flinches and turns to face me. “Yeah, men can be real dipshits. Sorry for being grudging about your smiles. I know I shouldn't be so possessive over you, but I've been waiting my whole life to find a woman I really click with and it's messing with my head.”

I gesture for him to come to me. When he slides onto the bed beside me, I grab his comb off the bedside table and pull it through his long black hair. “You know that you're the first man I've really clicked with as well. How about we make a deal that we'll save seventy-five percent of our smiles for each other.”

He grins and tilts his head back. I can tell he loves me messing with his hair. “Why only seventy-five percent?”

I tug his hair back to look him in the face. “Because we're going to need about twenty-five percent to use in social situations or everyone's going to think we're weird robots.”

He leans down and steals a quick kiss. “Agree to save eighty percent and you've got a deal, sunshine.”

“You're too much,” I say as I pull him back down for another kiss.

When we break apart, he opens his hand to reveal a pretty gold locket. It gleams in the sunlight streaming in through the cracks in the window blinds.

“What's this, babe?”

“It's me commemorating our one-year anniversary.”

I open my mouth to tell him it's only been about seven months, but he cuts me off.

“I know we haven't been together a full year, but today marks one year

since I met you and decided to make you mine.”

“I thought you didn’t believe in love at first sight,” I murmur as I lift the locket from his outstretched hand.

“Now, whatever in the world gave you that idea?”

I open the locket and see an image of me on one side and him on the other. I don’t know where he got the pictures, but I look stunning in mine, and he looks like the big, handsome biker he is in his. I lift it to have a closer look. His expression is pleased and his head is tilted slightly, showing off his strong, squared jawline.

“Anyone who sees this is going to think I lucked out in the boyfriend category.” When he doesn’t immediately respond, I launch myself at him and hug him as tight as I can. When I speak my voice is choked with emotion. “Thank you, babe. I love it.”

He takes it from my hand and drapes it over my head. It’s longer and hangs down between my breasts. “It looks good on you, sunshine.”

I wrap my hand around it and try to fight back my emotions. I can’t believe I’m feeling this much over such a small token. The thing is, though, this doesn’t feel like a small thing at all. I’m crazy about him. Dutch is my one. I can feel it in my bones.

Dutch twines a lock of my hair around one finger and gently changes the subject. “Are you going into work today?”

I nod, trying not to let my anxiety about work show. “Yeah, I’m putting in my notice.”

He frowns, even as he watches me finger my newest token of his affection. “You sure that’s what you want to do? I don’t want to be the reason your career tanks.”

“My semester’s up and I can’t wait to get the hell out of that internship.” I try to lighten my tone because whatever is going on between us feels heavy.

“It’s the worst.”

“From what you’ve told me, your boss is prize asshole and assholes don’t change. Trust me on that, Joy.”

“I don’t doubt it. All I know is if he finds out I’m dating a member of the Savage Legion MC, he’ll shit a brick.”

Dutch smiles at me indulgently. “You do have a way with words, sunshine. Maybe you should have been a poet rather than a lawyer.”

I mock growl at him. “A poet? Forget about being a poet. I’m out to change the world.” Flashing him a small grin, I add, “Or at least our little corner of the world.”

His expression sobers. “I know you didn’t ask, but I think you’re on the wrong side of the table if you want to make a real difference to the world. Rather than interning with a cutthroat douchebag district attorney, you would have a better chance of making positive changes working as a defense attorney and eventually a judge.”

I sigh, because my hot boyfriend is not wrong about that. “If I don’t get my ass out the door, I’m not going to end up on either side of the table. I can’t afford to mess up my internship, because if I do, no one in this town will hire me. I’ve also got the bar exam to worry about.”

“You’ll do just fine,” he assures me. With a flick of his wrist, Dutch pulls back the blanket and jerks his chin toward the bathroom. “Grab a shower and I’ll make you some coffee and toast.”

I fling my arms around his neck and kiss him hard. “You’re the best boyfriend ever.”

“Yeah, I’m pretty cool. Now go, before I throw you back down on the bed and lick you until you come screaming my name.”

I hop out of bed laughing and happy to finally be in the relationship I’ve always dreamed about.

Driving to work is when my anxiety spikes. I haven't come clean with the man I love about how horrible my boss is, because if I did, Dutch would be sitting in prison for mangling him.

Mr. Henderson is sixty if he's a day and all the other interns warned me on day one to keep my backside from his reach. I do my best to stay at least an arm's length away, but he's been getting more persistent over the last few months. I swear, I'm starting to feel like he intentionally targets me.

Today marks the earliest I can opt out of my internship without getting penalized. I'm all set to do it just to get away from him. The old buzzard has taught me a lot about what I don't want to do with my life. That's the only positive thing that came out of this internship, because rather than let me perform research for his cases or observe depositions like my professor said, he's just turned me into his glorified secretary. Well, that ends today.

I walk into the office and find there isn't a soul in sight. That's weird. Normally, there are half a dozen people milling about the district attorney's offices. We're in an annex across from the courthouse and even the parking lot was mostly empty. I know it's not a public holiday.

I see my boss, Mr. Henderson, sitting at a table in the boardroom, which seems strange. Usually he's in his office which is surrounded by glass walls butting out into the clerical hub, he likes to keep an eye on everyone from that vantage point. He picks up his coffee and glances up at me as he brings the cup to his mouth. There is something in the way he looks at me that's different today. It's mean and kind of disgusted.

I head to my desk and fire up my computer. There's a note pinned to the screen asking me to bring a file from Henderson's office to the boardroom, I sigh because I really didn't want to deal with that old bastard so early in the day. I open the door and walk in, there is zero personality in his glass box of an office, it's almost like a coffin, bare of any personal mementos or photographs. Walking over to his leather-topped desk I open the second drawer from the top and take out the manila folder.

I knock gently on the frame of the boardroom door and stick my head into the room. “Good morning Mr. Henderson, I’ve brought you the file you asked for.”

“Have a seat, Joy. We need to talk.” His curt tone worries me, so I do as he asks, dropping the folder onto the table.

He puts down the file he’s been flipping through, and I see my picture clipped to the front page. Shock roils through my gut when I see he’s got what appears to be a police report on me.

“I’ve never been arrested,” I blurt out without thinking. My mind is filling with wild thoughts that someone is setting me up. For what, I don’t know and can’t imagine.

His thin lips stretch into a smile that doesn’t reach his eyes. His weathered hand grabs something from a stack of papers on the table in front of him and he pushes it toward me. “Care to tell me what this is, Ms. Covington?”

I pick up a black-and-white photo of Dutch and I dancing at a local bar, one his club owns in the center of town. Henderson is one of the most narrow-minded, judgmental old men I’ve ever met. I knew if he found out who I was dating it would be a problem.

He flicks another picture at me. It’s one of me on the back of Dutch’s bike with my arms wrapped around his waist and the tips of my fingers tucked into the waistband of his jeans. It’s not obscene by any stretch of the imagination, but the pose seems mildly inappropriate. Another lands on top of that one. It’s of Dutch and me kissing as he backs me in through the front door of our place. We look like we’re getting ready to fuck. This picture was taken last week, and, indeed, we did fuck each other’s brains out.

I clear my throat and try to sound professional. “I believe this would be called my personal life, sir.”

The old man slams his fist down onto the top of the table. “Don’t try to get cute with me, Ms. Covington. This is evidence of you fraternizing with the enemy.”

“I’m not sure I understand, sir. Enemies are for times of war. The state of California is not at war with anyone, much less a group of men who enjoy recreational motor sports.”

His upper lip curls up in disgust. “So, now we’re playing dumb, are we?”

“No, sir, not at all. All I’m saying is there are no cases open or charges pending for my gentleman friend or his club brothers at this time. Therefore, I sincerely don’t see a conflict of interest.”

“So, you’re saying that as long as there are no open charges pending it okay to have our employees to have intimate relationships with career criminals, right?”

I swallow thickly. I guess that since I’m drawing a tiny salary, that makes me technically an employee of sorts. “No, of course not, sir.”

His indignant voice rings out, far too loud for the size of the room, it’s like he’s giving a speech at Town Hall. “The good citizens of Las Salinas, California have elected me to be their district attorney for twenty-three consecutive years. That’s almost unheard of in this state.”

“Yes, sir. You’re a well-respected member of the community and good at your job.”

Momentarily appeased, he lowers his voice. “District attorneys are the most powerful officials in the criminal justice system. We’re responsible for controlling the operation of a system that guarantees the rule of law by ensuring criminals are held accountable for their actions.”

Sweet Jesus, this man did love the sound of his own voice. I make a mental note to add *pompous* to the long list of odious qualities I’ve assigned to him in my own mind.

He glares at me as he continues. “In order to maintain the integrity of this office, I cannot allow my subordinates to invite public scrutiny or scorn. Do you have any idea of the untenable position you’ve put this department in?”

“I’m sorry, sir. I certainly didn’t mean to impugn the dignity of your office in any way. I think the best way to resolve this situation would be for me to resign my internship. This would not only avoid any potential conflict of interest, but would assure there isn’t the appearance of any impropriety associated with your office.”

His expression turns calculating. He sits back in his expensive leather chair and steepled his fingers together like a cartoon supervillain. “I don’t think you understand that prosecutorial power is vast and virtually unrestrained, particularly in Las Salinas. I’m given a wide berth when it comes to making decisions regarding charges levied against offenders, what constitutes enough evidence to prosecute and can even at times predetermine the outcome of criminal cases.”

That sounds like an absurd overreach, but I simply nod and murmur, “The position of prosecutor sounds powerful indeed.”

His expression takes on an arrogant edge and the words that come out of his mouth next truly shock me. “In towns like Las Salinas, there are few checks on the discretion of prosecutorial power, and the few mechanisms that exist to hold prosecutors accountable are weak. The supreme court protects us from both public and judicial scrutiny.”

Now, I’m full-on suspicious of his motivations because this is beginning to feel threatening. The worst part is I strongly suspect that he’s being fairly accurate about the poor checks and balances system for publicly elected prosecutors. “Do you mind if I ask what you’re driving at, Mr. Henderson?”

He grabs his coffee cup and takes a gulp before answering me. “What I’m saying is I had local law enforcement investigate you and report back to me every detail of your life. You could kick up a fuss, but nothing will come of it because the power of my position shields me from accusations of wrongdoing.”

I sincerely doubt that, but I feel a sense of unease that he’s up to something. “Well, I wasn’t planning on complaining, but I still don’t understand what you’re driving at.”

“What I’m saying is you have something I want, and I have the means by which to compel you to give it to me.”

A sick feeling twists in the pit of my stomach because I know what he wants from me.

My voice turns cold. “Where are all my co-workers today, Mr. Henderson?”

“I generously gave them the day off. I’ve scheduled a maintenance crew to come in three hours to flush out the ventilation system in this archaic building. There’s a small chance the dust blown out may contain spores and fungi that might pose a health and safety threat. We wouldn’t want that, right, Ms. Covington?”

“No, sir, I guess not.” Rather than get into a conversation about sexual harassment with this old geezer, I stand and take a step backwards toward the door. “I’ll just leave a letter of resignation on my desk and take off for the day.”

He grits through his teeth. “Sit down, Ms. Covington. Do it now, before I lose all patience with you,” He grits through his teeth.

“Yeah, I don’t think so, sir. You’re making me feel really uncomfortable right now.”

“Of course you’re uncomfortable. You just realized I have all the power in this situation and you have none.”

Taking another step backwards, I lift my chin. “In this situation, I have the power to move my feet, and I’m taking it.”

I turn to make a run for my purse so I can get my keys and get the hell out of here, but run right into a wall of muscle. I look up to see a bald man wearing green overalls. It’s what the Las Salinas County maintenance workers wear. His hand comes out hard and fast around my upper arm and he jerks me back inside the boardroom and closes the door behind him.

“You said keep her here, right, boss?”

“Indeed, I did, Jeremy.” The old man’s voice sounds all too pleased with himself.

“You wanna take her across the table right now, boss?”

My head snaps up and I gape at Henderson. All this time, I thought he was trying to make me feel like I had to become his mistress or fuck buddy because he was a powerful man and wanted me. Now I see that this whole song and dance was his way of telling me he was going to rape me and there wasn’t a damn thing I could do about it.

Trying to think on my feet, I stammer, “Of course Mr. Henderson doesn’t want that. He’s not an animal who has to denigrate himself by forcing himself on women. I’m sure women are fighting to get into his bed.”

I watch the old man’s excited expression turn into a smirk. “Nice try, Ms. Covington. You are going to do exactly what I say, because if you don’t, I’m going to have you picked up and charged with using your proximity to me to steal information to be used by the criminals you run with. The good citizens of this town won’t look kindly upon a trusted intern I accepted into our office using her position to help criminals push drugs, run guns, and traffic women.”

“You wouldn’t dare try to get me arrested because there’s no evidence I did anything wrong.”

“Of course there is. You tried to sneak in when you knew the office was supposed to be closed to access confidential information. You entered my office and stole a file from the drawer,” he picks up the folder I brought him and waves it for emphasis. “Your actions have all been captured on the security cameras. Thankfully, I was here to stop you.”

I open my mouth to object, but he shushes me. “Please stop talking. Your lies are getting tiresome. The worst part was, you tried to knock me over the head with a chair when I foiled your plan. Thank God Jeremy was here to stop you.” Glancing at his henchman, he asks, “Right Jeremy?”

“Yeah, sure, boss. It happened just like you said.” Jeremy turns me around to face Henderson and wraps one hand around my throat. “Do I get a turn too, or is she too special for me?”

The old man answers, his voice dripping with disdain, “Oh, this one fucks dirty bikers, Jeremy. She’s not special at all. But I get her first. When I tire of her, you can have a turn or two.” After a brief pause where he stares me down, he adds, “Tell me that you understand the situation, Joy.”

Jeremy’s hand loosens from around my neck, and I force out the words he wants to hear. “I’m going to do what you say, when you say, because if I don’t, you’re going to frame me—”

“Ah, not frame. Try again, you silly bitch.”

“If I don’t do what you say, you’re going to report my criminal activity and put me in jail for a long time.” I decide if I keep him talking then maybe I can get myself out of this.

Henderson stands and leans over the table. “You do understand that being in prison would be a precarious situation for you, right? Of course, we’d try to guarantee your safety, but truth be told, anything could happen to you when you go to the mess hall, the restrooms, showers, or even while you’re sleeping in your cell at night.”

I hate this asshole with the fire of a thousand suns. “Yeah, I get that.”

“Let her go, Jeremy.”

Instead of just letting me go, Jeremy grabs my throat tighter and flings me back into the chair I had been sitting in earlier.

“Moving forward, you’re coming home with me tonight and any other night I ask. You belong to me until I say otherwise. Understood?”

I nod, feeling hollow and empty inside. Obviously, I’m not planning on doing any such thing, but I need to figure out how to get out of this situation. “Yes, sir.”

When I glance at the door, I see his evil henchman is already milling about near my desk, clearly planning to police me for the rest of the day. As I head for the door, Henderson speaks one last time.

“Do you know what suicide by cop is, Ms. Covington?”

I turn to look at him, feeling desperate to say whatever he wants to hear so I can get some space away from him to think. “Yes. It’s when a suicidal individual forces a law enforcement officer to use deadly force.”

“I’ve bumped into multiple suicide by cop cases over the years that were highly suspicious. Want to know what I did in those instances?”

“What?” I whisper.

“I did not do a thing. You see, when I have to choose between a crazy criminal or one of Las Salinas’s finest, I always side with law enforcement.”

I feel like I’m going to throw up.

Studying the expression on my face, Henderson says, “I just want to be clear with you about what’s going to happen to that filthy biker you’re so fond of if you let him put his hands on you again. It would be a shame for that to happen to Mr. Alexander Scott, such a tragic end for a distinguished veteran. Though PTSD can so often be an undiagnosed problem in our returning heroes.”

I can’t take it anymore. I run from his office straight across to the bathroom, and barely make it to the sink before I throw up. I’ve been doing that a lot lately, mostly in the morning.

When I lift my head and look at myself in the mirror, I suddenly realize what that probably means. I’m pregnant with Dutch’s child and I know beyond a shadow of a doubt this old man will force me to end the pregnancy. If today is any indication, he’s good at getting what he wants. I still can’t get my head around how he orchestrated this entire situation, how he boxed me in so neatly.

The idea of being forced to terminate Dutch's child tears at my heart. I can't do it. I won't do it. I'll do whatever it takes to give our child a chance at life. My only choice is to run.

My one hesitation is thinking that Henderson might take out his frustrations on Dutch. Then I realize he won't do that. He won't eliminate the most effective weapon in his arsenal to keep me in line. No, if and when he gets me back, he'll use Dutch to manipulate me into doing what he wants.

That decides it. I lift the window, jump out, and hitch a ride with the first stranger I meet, leaving behind my keys, ID, money, and all my worldly possessions. I'm too numb to feel the pain of losing everything, but I know this is the only way.

Chapter 2

Dutch

Present Day

I polish off my sixth beer of the night and take out my phone. My hand is shaking and my palms are sweaty. I feel certain that if I can just delete the damn message, I'll finally be able to let go. It's been six fucking years tonight. There is a clawing need in my soul to stop tormenting myself with thoughts of finding her, or of her wandering back into my life of her own accord. I open the voicemail and my finger hovers over the delete button.

"Just tap the damn button," I mutter to myself. *Cut the cord once and for all*, a little voice in the back of my head demands. I know it's the only way to stop me from tormenting myself with the sound of her voice and the image of her smiling face.

The bar is heaving, wall-to-wall brothers, vixens, and wives. I stare down at the image of her smiling face. I remember creating that icon. She was just so pretty that day that I wanted to remember her forever in that pose. Now, all I want to do is forget.

Cleo, our president Siege's wife and the club busybody, lands in the chair across from me. "You okay, Dutch?"

"Whatever it is, my answer is no."

"What in the world are you talking about?" she demands.

"I saw how you gave Tank a little assignment and she turned into a wife in no time. If you're here to do the same to me, forget it."

"Christ on a cracker, you're being so unreasonable that I don't even know what to do with you."

“Read my lips,” I say, pointing to my mouth. “My answer is no.”

She frowns at me. “You haven’t even heard the question yet.”

Siege lands beside her and asks, “Have you asked him yet?”

I shove my phone into my pocket and grumble, “I knew it.”

Cleo sighs and slides my empty beer mug aside. “You’re a handsome man.”

“Yeah, and I don’t need to be fixed up with someone half my age. That might be Tank’s idea of the perfect woman, but it’s sure as fuck is not mine.”

Cleo insists, “Just calm down for two minutes and let me talk.”

Siege is just staring at me blankly. Clearly, he doesn’t have a horse in this particular race.

“Fine. What do you want from me?”

“It’s my best friend, Mattie.”

I cut her off at the pass. “She’s a real nice lady, but not my type.”

“The woman is not looking for a fucking husband. She’s looking for a date to a formal event. You’re the only brother with his own tux who’s not already married,” Siege explains.

Relief surges through my body and a relieved laugh slips out. “Seriously? That’s all you wanted, me to look good in a suit?”

Siege grins, but Cleo isn’t so easily appeased. “And you have to be polite, not fart, hold the door open for her like a true gentleman, not scratch your balls, make polite conversation, and not belch while you eat.”

I point at Cleo and wiggle my finger at her. “I see what you did there. Half the fucking date involves making sure I don’t do revolting things in public.”

Siege laughs at my irritation. “Come on, don’t act so shocked and appalled. You don’t do most of that stuff anyway.”

Cleo quickly asks, “You know Mattie has a disability, right?”

“I’ve seen her walking with her forearm crutches. I ain’t stupid.”

“Yeah, don’t mention that, like, at all.”

“Jesus, how many men show up to escort a nice lady and begin talking about her fucking personal medical issues right off the bat?”

Cleo begins listing off fairly embarrassing incidents involving her friend. “She had a lifeguard tell her she couldn’t get in the pool because he couldn’t watch over her exclusively. One Tinder date never even sat down. He just berated her for not putting that she was disabled in her profile.”

“Fuck, that’s harsh,” I admit.

“Yep, though he didn’t put it as politely as that,” Cleo adds. “Rage asked her if her assistive walking sticks could double as ski poles and Bane asked if she was going to eventually end up in a wheelchair.”

I run both hands over my face. “Fucking hell. I see why you came to me. Yeah, I’ll take her to a fucking formal function without embarrassing the shit out of her.”

Cleo lets out a relieved sigh. “Thank goodness. She knows they weren’t intentionally being mean, but she doesn’t like her disability to be the only thing people focus on. Don’t worry, my best friend is not interested in dating you. I promise.”

“Yeah, will she’s in good company. No-fucking-body on God’s green earth wants to date me.”

Cleo pats my shoulder. “Don’t worry. You just haven’t found your one yet, Dutch. It’ll happen when you least expect it.”

“Yeah, probably.” I don’t mention that it already happened to me, but she

flaked and ran off on me. I've spent years looking for her but it's like she fell off the end of the fucking earth. "Do you mind if I ask where I'm taking her?"

"The Enchantment Under the Sea ball at the mayor's mansion. Every year he hosts a formal get together for We-Bes."

"What the fuck is a We-Be?" I ask, thoroughly confused.

"Us civil servants. We're hired instead of being appointed or elected. We call ourselves We-Bes because our tenure typically survives transitions of political leadership. In other words, we be there when the elected officials come and we be there when those same officials leave."

I roll my eyes. "That's clever. And droll."

"Yeah," Cleo acknowledges. "We're not a famously humorous bunch. It takes very little to tickle our funny bones."

"Understood. Just tell me when and where."

"It's next Saturday night from six until eleven in the evening. All the men are wearing water related bowties and pocket silks."

"Got it. Where do I pick her up from? Do I need a limo? Should I schedule dinner before? Does she need to be escorted inside her apartment and tucked in for the night?"

A soft voice drifts from behind us. "Yes to the limo and dinner, but no to the tucking in."

I slowly turn around to see Mattie standing nearby, an amused smirk on her face.

I shrug and wink at her. "You can't blame a guy for trying, right?"

She smiles and moves over to sit with us. "I suppose not. I can pay for half of the costs of the limo and pay for my own dinner."

“Or you could just leave everything to me. This could be a practice date for both of us.”

Her expression droops slightly. “But I don’t need a practice date because I don’t plan to begin dating. Like, not ever.”

I’m sure that’s because of her bad experience with the Tinder date. “Never say never, sweetheart. One never knows what fate has in store for them.”

Her eyes slide away and she murmurs something under her breath that I can’t quite make out.

I get up from the bar and say my goodbyes to Siege and Cleo. Then I turn to Mattie. “And I’ll see you around five on Saturday, okay?”

She nods, looking a bit more emotional than I would have expected.

I run off to try to figure out why I’m passing up a perfectly sweet woman in order to moon over the one who got away. Needing some air, I get on my bike and head out of town. A nice ride up the western seaboard is just what I need to help clear my head. I love riding the open road at night, there is something so peaceful and serene about it.

I kick back on my Harley and relax. I can barely see the people moving about from this vantage point. They all look like insignificant ants. They’re not, though. Unlike me, they’re all bright, vibrant people with jobs, loved ones, and lives that mean something to them. Me? I’m just drifting aimlessly through life, building wealth for no apparent reason because I can’t be fucking bothered to spend any of it. I don’t even have a home of my own. I just live at the clubhouse. Nope, my club brothers are the only thing I care about because the only other thing I ever cared about ran out on me.

I lift my eyes from the city below to the star-filled sky and remember the one joy of my life. Images rise in my mind of her smiling face, her long brown curls, and her big brown eyes. I remember what she looked like naked, on top of me, riding my cock. She loved my cock. And my mouth. Boy did she ever fucking love my tongue, almost as much as I loved tasting her. Joy had been my everything, the start of my happily ever after. I’d planned out a

whole future in my mind for us, with everything a woman could ever want.

My girl had been smart. She was college educated and on fire to change the world. Then she fucking met me, and I must have somehow derailed all her best laid plans. I don't know exactly how I fucked her life up, but I did. There must have been signs that she was unhappy with me. I had my head stuck so far up my own ass that I didn't see them, though. One minute we were laughing, joking, and I was thinking about engagement rings, and the next she was just fucking gone.

I fish my phone out of my pocket, with a few flicks of my thumb, her voice comes through the speaker and my heart breaks all over again as I listen to her message one more time.

Her voice crackles with emotion. "Dutch, baby. I don't know how to say this so I'll just come right out with it. I thought I could do this, school, work, the bar exam, you. I thought I could handle it, but I can't. I'm buckling under the stress. Look, I'm gonna bounce. Don't try to find me. I need some time to work on myself. I don't know if we'll ever see each other again. If we don't, I want you to know that you were the best thing that ever happened to me. I wish you could have been my happily ever after."

The line goes dead and I just lay there and stare at the stars. I used to cry after listening to her Dear John message, but all my tears ran out years ago. Now there is just an emptiness, a hollowed-out space where my heart used to be. In the end, I don't erase the message because I just can't let go of that last sliver of a connection to the woman I never stopped loving.

Chapter 3

Dutch

I manage to find an aqua-colored bow tie and silk pocket square with little bubbles printed on it which was a relief, as the only other sea-related stuff I could find was Rider's daughter's mermaid bandana. When I step out of my room at the clubhouse, there's a mixture of laughs and gasps. I'm the guy no one ever expects to clean up well, but even if I say so myself I look pretty spiffy tonight. I get in the limo and arrive at Mattie's house right on time.

I go through the motions of being a dutiful date, complimenting her dress, holding the door open for her at the fancy restaurant I booked, and making polite, non-offensive conversation as we ate. Mattie is nice, but seems a bit preoccupied during the meal. As far as favors for friends go, this is not a painful one.

We arrive at the mayor's mansion around six thirty and are given name tags to wear. It feels like an odd clash with the formal wear, but I guess this is the way civil service parties go. I try to take it all in stride. I'm basically just her plus one for the evening. I walk the room with her and stand silently by as she makes her rounds and talks to everyone in the room. Mattie is good at networking. I quickly realize that's what brought her to the Enchantment Under the Sea ball, the opportunity to talk to civil servants from every walk of life.

I have to admit that paying attention to their mundane conversation is difficult. Everyone's talking about an older gentleman who keeled over dead in his office a few weeks ago. He was a lawyer of some sort, a prosecutor from what I can pick up. For a moment it makes me think of Joy again, she'd worked for some lawyer and for the life of me I can't remember his name—Anderson maybe? She mostly used to refer to him as the douchebag.

I didn't know this guy they're all taking about, so I tune out. My eyes keep straying around the room, just looking at the guests and the mildly interesting décor.

Servers walk around with elegant silver trays filled with champagne and hors d'oeuvres. Among them, I see a server with long brown hair pulled neatly away from her face walk through the crowd with a tray balanced on one hand.

I stand there gaping, because this person bears such a strong resemblance to Joy. It doesn't make sense to think an educated woman like Joy would be serving drinks at a function like this, but I couldn't let go of that one in a million chance that it could be her. I murmur an excuse to Mattie about going to the restroom and immediately head in the direction I saw the server go.

I end up near the kitchen, searching the multitude of white-gloved waiters and waitresses. I recognize a few of them just from being around town, but my Joy is nowhere to be found. After searching for about fifteen minutes, I realize she was just another figment of my imagination. This is me endlessly tormenting myself with what I can never have. It's fucking sick and I don't know why I can't stop.

After Joy left, I spent a lot of time looking for her. She never showed up at our house, never picked up any of her possessions, and never saw any member of her family that I could tell. I tried contacting them and was met with a brick wall. All they'd say was that she'd moved to the East Coast to start afresh. I searched for two or three years but there was never any trace of her, eventually I moved out of the house we shared and into the Savage Legion clubhouse. Now I've come full circle, searching faces in a crowd for her all over again.

Frustrated, I turn around, planning to go directly back to Mattie. I'm supposed to be her date, and I should have never left her to go chasing a fever dream.

The minute I turn around, there she is. Joy is standing right in front of me with a silver tray clutched to her chest. I'm so shocked that I don't know what to say. She's so close I can reach out and touch her.

When I don't speak, she does. "Dutch, I didn't expect to see you here tonight. I thought you didn't like fancy parties."

I clear my throat and try my best to act like a normal human being, and not like a man about to lose his shit in a fucking civil servants' shindig. "Actually, I'm here escorting a friend. Well, more like the friend of a friend."

"Well, that's nice of you." Her eyes trail over my body and that old look of admiration slides onto her face. "You sure look nice tonight." Her eyes slide away and she adds, "You always did clean up good."

I know I shouldn't say it, but the words come out anyhow. "You left me, sunshine. You didn't even tell me goodbye in person." I can hear the hurt in my own voice. I snap my mouth shut, wishing I could find the right words, words that didn't sound desperately lonely. I don't know what I expect her to say, but she doesn't explain.

Instead, she just says, "Sorry. I'm so fucking sorry that happened."

I suck in a deep breath and nod. "Yeah, I'm sorry that happened too. I thought we had something special."

Joy glances around, as if worried someone will see her talking to me. Then she lowers her voice. "Would it be possible for us to get together and talk? I have so many things I want to say to you."

Just like that, it's as if my wildest dream has finally come true. Not only is my Joy back, but she wants to talk to me. She says she has things to tell me. I want to hope, but I don't dare. Whatever I did to drive her away must be such an intrinsic part of my personality that I don't even see how off-putting it is. Still, I can't say no to my Joy.

"Yes, of course. I would love to meet up and talk about old times. How does tomorrow sound?"

She nods and her expression brightens. "I would love that. How about we meet at your club's bar in town just like we used to?"

"Yes. That would be fine. Come by around noon. The bar won't be open, but if you buzz the intercom, I'll let you in. I'll bring us lunch," I say to sweeten the deal.

“You always were sweet and generous. I’ve really missed that about you.”

I have come to understand how nice guys always come in last, so I’m not sure if I want to continue being nice, particularly to Joy. What I really want is to scream that if she missed me that much, she could have come back any time, but I don’t. I’m too curious to see what she wants to talk to me about and to see if she will offer me an explanation for why she ran out on me.

We stand there for a moment too long, staring into each other’s eyes. I realize there’s something different about her, but I can’t put my finger on it. It’s only been six years, but her face looks fuller. She’s still as pretty as ever she was.

Someone calls her name, and she murmurs, “I’m sorry, I have to go back to work. I’ll see you tomorrow at the bar. Twelve o’clock sharp, right.”

I nod. “Yep, that’s right. I’ll see you then. It was nice to talk to you again, Joy.”

Putting one foot in front of the other, I make myself walk away. I still can’t believe after all this time and how long and hard I searched for her that I’m just walking away. Some primitive part of my personality wants to run back to her, sling her over one shoulder, and run away. Since I’m not a total caveman, I resist the impulse, but just fucking barely.

It only takes me a few minutes to find Mattie again. One look at me and her expression turns concerned. “What happened to you, Dutch? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

“I haven’t seen a ghost,” I assure her. “I just bumped into an old friend I haven’t seen in years.”

“I’ve talked to everyone I needed to speak with tonight. I’m ready to go if you are.”

“Are you sure, Mattie? This is your special ball and there’s a lot of the evening left.”

She snorts a laugh, reminding me so much of Cleo that it makes me smile. Mattie lowers her voice and says, “I don’t give two hoots in hell about this ball. It was just easier to come here and talk to a couple of dozen people than to run all over town tracking them down individually. Seriously, that’s all it was about for me tonight.”

I can’t keep the smile off my face for anything. “Well then, Miss Mattie, I would be very happy to take you home.”

She chuckles and shakes her head at me. “I think this is the first time all night that I’ve seen you truly happy.”

“Nothing in this world would make me a happier man than being able to take off this bow tie and unbutton this stiff collar shirt. That would put a smile on my face ten out of ten times.”

Mattie looks more relaxed than she has been all evening as we walk out into the chill night air. “Truth be told, I feel the same way about high heels.”

“I can sure believe that. I do not know how you ladies walk around in those things.” I take a peek down at her heels. “The ones you’re wearing tonight don’t look too high.”

“They’re called kitten heels. There are about all I can manage these days.”

“Well, they are cute as can be. You made a good choice there.”

I open the limo door and help her in, then go around and hop in the other side. “All in all, this has been a really nice evening. I’m glad Cleo gave me the opportunity to get out a little bit with you.”

Mattie gives me a teasing smile. “You’re less annoying and obnoxious than the last twenty guys I’ve been out with.”

“Only twenty, huh? Must be losing my touch.”

Mattie laughs at my lame joke and we chat all the way to her house.

By the time I make it back to the clubhouse, a lot of the angst and anxiety have evaporated. Joy is back in town. Nothing can compare to that news. However, the fact that I managed to make it through the evening without totally humiliating Cleo's friend is a close second.

One of my best friends and closest club brothers is lying in wait for me when I enter the clubhouse.

"You look like a date with Cleo's friend agreed with you. Are we gonna see romance on the horizon for you?" Rigs asks.

I hold up both hands, my bowtie dangling from one. "I already warned Cleo that Mattie is not my type."

My longtime friend's voice turns cold. "Is it because she's disabled?"

"Hell the fuck no. Of course not. I can't believe you asked me that, or you'd even think I was so shallow."

There's something strange about his expression. I walk over, sit across from him and drink down someone's leftover beer, it's warm and I pull a disgusted face.

Rigs frowns at me. "Want me to pull you a fresh beer? Mel's already gone home."

"No, I'm good. Want to tell me why you're so fucking interested in my evening?"

"I'm not, you pretentious, tuxedo wearing prick."

I narrow my eyes at him. "Correct me if I'm wrong, but we don't normally go at each other this way."

"You started it," Rigs shoots back.

"You said that you weren't interested in my evening. That must mean you were interested in Mattie's evening."

Rigs jumps to his feet but I grab his shirt and yank him back down. “If you like Cleo’s friend, why the fuck didn’t you speak up?”

“Why in the fuck would I do that when Cleo already decided I wasn’t good enough for her friend? Apparently, I don’t have good manners or own a tux.”

“Alright, brother, I’m gonna be real honest with you. Mattie seems like a really nice lady, but she didn’t warm up to me at all. I don’t think she likes fancy parties, high heels, or tuxedos.”

Rigs shoots me a disparaging look. “Shows how much you know. All women love high heels. They collect shoes like men do pocketknives.”

“Not Mattie. She only wears kitten heels,” I say with the self-assured conviction of a man who is only certain of this one fact.

“What in the hell are those?”

“As near as I can tell they’re shoes with short spiky heels. It’s like if a woman was going to a special party and knew she should be wearing high heels but didn’t want to. Kitten heels barely meet the criteria.”

“Well, I guess that makes sense,” my friend acknowledges. “I think it’s clever how she found that work around.”

“Sure, it’s clever. Mattie is like Cleo. She’s a real smart lady. And she’s really down to earth too.

A soft smile slides onto Rigs’ face. “I noticed that too. She’s real pretty too.”

“Well, I’ll let you in on another little secret. You know how Mattie has a hard time getting around right?”

My friend’s facial expression shifts to one of annoyance.

“Don’t get mad. Bear with me for just a minute and let me explain. Mattie was working tonight. She told me the only reason she went to the ball was that she could talk to a bunch of people all in the same evening. She said it’s

easier on her than traveling all over town trying to see them all individually. As soon as she got finished talking to her people, she had me take her home and drop her right off.”

My longtime friend sits back in his seat. “I like hearing about how Mattie’s evening went.”

“Give me your phone, you stupid fucker.”

Rigs pulls out his phone. “Did you take pictures?” His hopeful expression tugs at my heart.

“No, but if I had known you are sweet on Mattie, I would have taken a bunch of pictures for you. I’ve got something better, her phone number.”

My friend freezes. “Wait, I can’t call her.”

“You’re not an adolescent with his first crush. You’re the spiritual leader of the Savage Legion MC. Any woman in her right mind would be happy to catch your interest. Just call her up and fucking ask her out.”

Rigs takes his phone and tries to put it back in his pocket. “It’s too late to call now. I’ll try her tomorrow.”

“Call the number, Rigs, or I’m gonna call her and chat her up myself.”

Rigs’ head jerks up and he glares at me. “If you put a move on Mattie, you and I are gonna have a problem.”

Rather than answering, I just stare at him.

Instead of putting his phone away, he presses it against his forehead as he thinks it over.

“What’s really eating at you, Rigs? You are literally never this conflicted about anything. You’re the most decisive man I know.”

“You know I took that pedo apart, piece by piece. Same with the depraved fucker who used to beat the shit out of Tank’s old lady.”

“You did what you had to do.”

“I chose to kill.”

“Someone had to do it, brother.”

He doesn't say anything, so I ask, “Do you do it because you enjoy it?”

“Fuck no. It tears me up inside.”

“Then leave it for someone else to do.”

“I can't,” he whispers, “because then it will tear them up inside.”

“Fucking hell. You do the killing because you don't want that kind of shit hanging around in our brains eating away at us, right?”

Rigs nods. “What if I let the darkness in each time? Sometimes, I think it's burrowing deeper and deeper into my brain and it's going to turn me as evil as the ignorant fucks we hunt.”

“We served together in the military, Rigs. You know that ain't the way it works.” When he doesn't respond, I go at it from a different perspective. “You still believe in God, right?”

That gets his attention. “Of course I do. I just don't care for how man has perverted religion.”

“Well, God created man and then he made woman to be his companion, his better part. Women are supposed to be the gift from God that keeps us tender and decent.”

He's nodding before I even finish my explanation.

“God made women soft and sweet and men to protect them, right?”

“Yes.” His answer is firm and decisive.

“Well, I dropped Mattie off at her apartment. She's all alone, vulnerable

with no one to protect her while she investigates these missing kids. The last woman in her job was murdered by those evil fucks. What if something bad happens to her that you could have prevented because you were so wrapped up in your own shit that you didn't call her?"

His expression shifts, becoming less anxious but more worried. "I should probably check on her."

"Yeah. Check on her and offer to do some of the legwork for her that she can't do for herself. Offer to help her find the missing kids. I'll bet you anything she takes you up on it."

Rigs' expression brightens. "That's a good idea. Even if she doesn't like me, I can still keep her safe and help her with her work."

"Absolutely. If the two of you need anything, you let me know and I'll come running."

I head to my room, neglecting to say anything about my own relationship issues, mainly because I'm private that way. Joy has always been my most precious secret. During the months we dated all those years ago, I never talked about her to my club brothers. What we had felt fragile and special. I worried that talking about it would somehow change things between us. That seems like such a foolish thought now.

Chapter 4

Joy

I wake up to the smell of fresh roasted coffee and it's heavenly. Since my little one is still sleeping, I creep downstairs to get some morning brew and talk to my sister.

She's sitting at the kitchen table sipping her own coffee, and there's a large cup sitting in the middle of the table waiting for me.

"Have I ever mentioned that you're the best sister in the entire world?"

She grins at me. "Quite frequently. And I appreciate it."

I drop down in the chair beside her, pull the warm mug over, and take a sip. It's cool enough for me to take a gulp, so I do. "God, that's good."

"Alright, sis, don't leave me hanging. Did you find what you were looking for last night?"

I gleefully report, "Yes. I found what I was looking for and more."

"Spill it. I want to hear all the details."

"The horrible old bastard is, in fact, dead. It was all anybody at the party could talk about. I knew this was the perfect place to get the real scoop on what was going on. They can report him dead in the newspapers all they want, but I wasn't going to believe that until I bumped into someone who saw it firsthand."

"And you found such a person?"

"Several. Apparently, he had a heart attack at work. Several people from his office saw the whole thing go down. They said it happened incredibly fast. During the process, he threw up and urinated on himself."

“Sounds like a very undignified passing. Just what the old man deserved, if you ask me.”

“I agree. Several people said, although an ambulance was called, they weren’t able to revive him.”

“So, after six long years, this is finally all over?”

I nod, unable to believe it myself. “Yeah, I suppose it is. I don’t think he ever would have given up looking for me. We had to move four times in six years because he kept sending private investigators to look for us.” I take another sip of my coffee and shake my head. “I sometimes still can’t figure out why he targeted me. I barely talked to him, and then, one day, something just clicked in his brain and he started trying to pull me in.”

“Look, Joy, the old man was approaching seventy when he passed. They say that whatever problems we have in life become accentuated as we grow older. Henderson was probably a misogynistic prick who chased women his whole life. As he grew older, he just got more focused and persistent about it.”

“I guess you’re right. Whatever it was, I’m glad the whole ordeal is finally over.”

“Me too,” my sister agrees. “Does that mean you’re staying?”

“Yes. I’ve been dying to come home for years. I’ve missed everyone.” I take another leisurely sip of my coffee, and say, “And you won’t believe who I saw at the party last night.”

“Hopefully, one of your old college friends. You need to get right back into your life as quickly as possible.”

“I bumped into Chase’s father last night,” I blurt out.

“Holy shit,” my sister exclaims. “That hot biker you used to date?”

“The very same.” Memories of our last conversation before I was forced to flee race through my mind. It’s been six long years, and I haven’t gotten over

him.

My sister eyes me suspiciously. “Was he still hot or has he gotten old and wrinkly?”

I frown at her. “He was hotter than ever. I asked him if he would talk to me today.”

My sister’s eyes light up. “What did he say? Did he say yes? Tell me he said yes.”

I smile so big my face hurt. “He did. We’re supposed to meet at noon.”

“Oh my God, what are you going to wear?”

I shrug, delighted to be having a casual conversation with my older sister. It’s starting to feel like old times. “We’re meeting for lunch, so I thought I would wear jeans and a sweater.”

“Good call,” Tiffany responds happily. “Best not go overboard. I follow that keep it simple stupid rule.”

“That’s like something from the nineties. Mom used to talk about how less moving parts in your life meant less things to go wrong.”

“It was good advice then and it’s good advice now. And the best part is I get to spend more time with my nephew.”

“Chase is a good kid. I tried to raise him not to be an annoying little shit like we were growing up.”

“Well, whatever you did worked. He’s freaking adorable.”

My sister and I chat the morning away. After finding out the man who hounded me for years had finally died, my heart is light and untroubled. For the first time I see a future for myself and my son.

When my five-year-old creeps down the steps and into the kitchen, I hold my arms open for him. As always, he flies into my arms and I wrap him up in

a warm embrace.

I'm so grateful that we managed to stay one step ahead of a man who could have done genuine harm to both of us. Every time I look into Chase's face, all I see are reminders of his father. He favors Dutch so much and has his father's considerate disposition. However, there is a kindness about him that's all his own.

Thankfully, my son has never known any form of mistreatment, hunger, or true danger. He's totally innocent about the ways of the world and I plan to shelter him from the harsh realities of life for as long as possible.

I make him some breakfast, and Tiffany and I sit with him while he eats. He tells us all about his dreams. They are mostly about all of his stuffed animals coming to life.

By the time I leave the house for my meeting with Dutch, my son is happily building a fort made of sheets with Tiffany. Since my sister can't have children of her own, having Chase around has been a little slice of heaven for her.

I clear my mind and try to plan out all the things I want to talk to Dutch about. This is my chance to make him understand how serious the problem was when I left and how I couldn't risk him. My heart sinks every time I remember the tone of that old man's voice when he said *suicide by cop*. I honestly believe he was someone with way too much power to cross. Rich, powerful men who are used to getting their way are dangerous.

Sure, Dutch is big, strong, smart, and has the Savage Legion at his back. But nobody can win in a standoff against crooked cops. They'll lie, fabricate evidence, and manipulate the entire situation to make a person look bad. Look what Henderson had done to me, he'd tried to frame me and attempted to blackmail me into sleeping with him.

And then there is Chase to consider. I know that I need to tell Dutch that he as a son, but I want to wait until the time is right. If I ease him into it, my handsome biker might be more receptive to discovering he has a long-lost child. I had thought so many times of dropping a bug in his ear, but it's pretty

clear that if I'd told him, Dutch would have done one of two things. He would have told me to get lost, that he wasn't ready to be tied down with a woman and kid. Or he would have moved heaven and earth to find us. The first would have broken my heart and the second might have gotten him killed.

When I park at the bar, I'm hit with a wave of nostalgia. It looks exactly like I remember it. Although the sign on the front door says closed, before buzzing the intercom, I try the door and it opens like I was expected. Sure enough, Dutch is standing unloading food from a local restaurant on a nearby table.

He looks up when the bell on the door jingles. "Glad you could make it today, Joy."

"Thank you for agreeing to speak with me," I respond awkwardly.

When we're both seated and have had a chance to gather our thoughts, I ask, "Are you still a member of the Savage Legion?"

"Yes. Of course. My club is my life." Dutch doesn't go into why he's not wearing his cut today. Instead, he asks, "How about yourself? Did you manage to finish your degree and become a lawyer like you always wanted?"

"Unfortunately not," I answer quietly. "Life kind of got in the way."

"Yeah, I get that. Life has a tendency to throw you a curve ball every now and then. Like there was this one time, I was dating the girl of my dreams one minute and thought everything was going really well. The next thing I knew, I got dumped by voicemail and didn't see her again for years."

Hearing his very accurate description of how things went down between the two of us makes me lose my appetite. I put my fork down on my plate and take a moment to choose my words. "I apologize about that. In fact, that's what I wanted to talk to you about today."

Dutch takes a bite of his food and chews slowly as he looks at me. To say I felt scrutinized would be an understatement. Finally, he washes his bite down

with a gulp of coffee before inviting me to explain. “I’m all ears, sunshine. But let me go ahead and say that unless what you have to say makes a whole lot of sense, this is probably gonna be our last conversation.”

“Understood,” I respond anxiously. “You deserve far better treatment than you’ve gotten from me.”

The man I’m still crazy about doesn’t say a word. He just picks up his sandwich and takes another bite as he waits for me to explain.

I clear my throat and try to find a good starting point in what’s no doubt going to be a long, convoluted tale. “Remember that last morning we were together?”

He shrugs with one shoulder. “Yeah, I do. It was after a fabulous night of sex. You seemed very happy, loving, and carefree. I guess that’s why my getting a voicemail from you later dumping me was so hard to get my head around. That felt so out of the blue.”

“I was eager to get to work that morning so that I could resign from my internship. What I never told you was that old man Henderson had been sexually harassing me for weeks.”

Dutch’s mouth presses into a thin line as he thinks over my words. “You could have come to me. You could have filed a complaint against him with the city or done any number of things.”

“You know, there’s something a lot of folks don’t really understand about district attorneys. They wield a huge amount of discretionary decision-making power. It’s not just that they can decide whether or not to bring charges against someone, they also get to choose what the charges are, which in turn directly impacts the sentencing that judges are permitted to impose in any given situation.”

Dutch shoots me annoyed look. “What are you getting at, sunshine?”

“He had local law enforcement investigate me.”

“Cops don’t typically investigate private citizens without cause.”

“It was clearly a dirty cop performing some work on the side. Dutch, he had pictures of us together, kissing, and me on the back of your bike.”

“Correct me if I’m wrong, but that doesn’t sound like particularly incriminating information. So what, you were dating a biker. Was that really worth running away and throwing away your chance at graduating from college?”

“He framed me and threatened to fabricate evidence to ensure I got convicted. Said he’d put me away for a long time if I didn’t agree to be his mistress. He told me that from now on I would fuck where and when he said.”

Dutch’s expression morphs into one of pure blind fury. He leans over the table and says angrily, “Too damn bad you didn’t have boyfriend willing to stand up for you. Someone who wasn’t afraid to give the dirty bastard a dirt nap.” He pauses for a second and then spits out, “Only you did, and you never said a fucking word to him.”

“He threatened you too. Said he’d arrange a suicide by cop for you if I ever spoke to you again or let you put your hands on me.”

“It doesn’t fucking matter. You should have come straight to me with this bullshit. I would have taken care of it, no questions asked.”

“What if his dirty cop friends caught you out on your bike and gunned you down? God, Dutch, I know you’re tough, but Henderson was rich, powerful, and used to getting what he wanted.”

“Tough is an interesting choice of words. And I’m just some nobody. The best thing I’ve got going for me is I’m tough, just some asshole who likes to ride around on his motorcycle and act macho. That old bastard had college degrees, a country club membership, and the kind of status you see as untouchable, I was just a veteran without a regular job. To your mind, I was outclassed and outsmarted in every way, to the point that you never considered that I would win if the two of us went toe to toe, right?”

“That’s not it. I loved you.” The moment those words are out of my mouth, I regret them immensely. “I mean to say that I loved you then and never stopped, not even for one day.”

Dutch just stares at me with a sad, defeated expression on his face. “I think if that were true, at some point in the last six years you would have contacted me, just to say hello if nothing else.”

“I wanted to, but that asshole sent private investigators after me. We had to move several times to avoid being caught and dragged back into the situation I was trying so desperately to avoid.”

“We? What do you mean by we?”

I feel my face blanch. “Me. I meant to say me.”

Dutch eyes me suspiciously. “Why did you come back after all this time, Joy?”

“I got word that Henderson had passed away.”

“From who?”

“I don’t know exactly. All I got was a copy of his obituary from the local paper.” I fidget in my seat, growing more anxious by the minute. “Being on the run makes a person paranoid. I almost didn’t trust my luck when I read the obituary. Henderson was always crafty and manipulative. He used to preach the importance of always having a good strategy when going to court.”

“I don’t know, Joy. It’s hard to believe that this old man you only worked with for a few months stalked you for years to the point that you had to keep moving around to avoid him.”

“I totally agree, I told my sister the same thing just this morning. Don’t you think I’ve asked myself a thousand times why me? Not knowing why he did this kills me. I’ve analyzed every interaction I ever had with the man to see if I accidentally sent him mixed messages or let him to believe I was into

him. I wasn't able to find anything that would explain his behavior.”

“Are you sure he really hired people to look for you?”

“Yes. In fact, as the years wore on, the attempts to find me got more frequent. They'd threaten my extended family trying to find out where I'd gone. They engaged in riskier behavior to try to catch up with me. It feels like the older he got, the more desperate he became.”

I can see from his expression that Dutch believes me. “I can't imagine what was going through his head.”

“My sister thinks he was probably some kind of skirt chasing asshole his whole life and he just became more dogged about it as he got older.”

“Or it could be that you were his one that got away. He never had a taste, so it became his life's mission to get you.”

I throw my hands up in the air. “Hell, if I know what was going on with him. When I realized he was dirty, I wondered if he thought I'd seen something in the office and that's why he was after me. But I racked my brain and during my time as an intern I can't think of anything that would have triggered this. All I know is the thought of him catching up with me was terrifying. I didn't trust him any further than I could throw him. The man was a liar and a cheat. I could see him having his family list him as deceased to lure me back into his orbit.”

“I'm sure your sister could verify his death.”

“I got myself a job with the company catering the event last night. I know how those civil servants like to gossip, and since his death was recent, he'd be a hot topic of conversation.”

Understanding clicks onto his face. “So, that's why you were at the ball. Did you get the information you wanted?”

“I did. Apparently, he had a heart attack at work and several employees were talking about how sudden and traumatizing it was for them to see

something like that in the workplace. They openly talked about details they would only be privy to if they were there and saw what happened with their own eyes.”

Dutch takes a drink of his coffee and murmurs, “And the first thing you did after verifying his death was meet up with me?”

“Of course. You mean everything to me. I felt you deserved to know what happened.” Glancing away, I add, “I didn’t treat you right, and I know that I don’t deserve another chance, but I’d love an opportunity to at least have a friendship with you.”

He leans back in his chair and glances around as if he’s trying to find the right words to let me down easily. I remember the woman he was with at the ball. She was a pretty blond and seemed really into him.

“I’m sure you’ve moved on by now. The woman I saw with you last night was really beautiful and had the prettiest smile. I hope she saves at least eighty percent of them for you.” I can hear the sad, tormented sound of my own broken voice.

Dutch jumps to his feet. “Look, Joy, I need some time to clear my head. You popping back up in my life with such a wild story after all this time is unexpected. I’m gonna need a few days to think this over. Then maybe we can talk again.”

I automatically tear up because he’s right about me popping up with a tall tale. If I were him, I’d have a hard time believing it as well. “Of course, Dutch. Take as long as you need. If you have any questions, you can text me.” I grab a pen out of my purse and write my number down on a napkin and leave it on the table.

It takes me a minute to realize he’s waiting for me to leave so he can lock his club’s bar back up. “Thanks for talking to me again, Dutch. I wish our first time seeing each other after so long had been under better circumstances.”

“Me too, Joy. Me too.”

The wounded look in his eyes tears at my heart. Unfortunately, there is nothing for it at the moment. He asked for space, and the only correct course of action is to give it to him. I force myself to rise on shaking legs and put one foot in front of the other. Once I am out the front entrance and take gulp of fresh air, tears begin to stream down my face.

Chapter 5

Dutch

I'm left standing in the bar after Joy ran out with tears in her eyes. I drop back down into my seat and gaze at the half-eaten remnants of our lunch. Something about seeing Joy's lipstick stain on the rim of her cup really gets to me.

Hearing her story is heart wrenching. This woman had been so fucking good at keeping herself hidden that neither Henderson nor myself had been able to find her. I want to know how she did that, but didn't have the heart to get into it with her right off the bat.

No, right now I have much bigger questions that need to be answered. The first and foremost question in my mind was how this man managed to scare the living hell out of the woman I love. Terrify her enough to make her run and keep running until the bastard was six feet under and could no longer get to her.

Suddenly, the door swings open. I turned to look over my shoulder, expecting it to be Joy. Instead, I find Rigs has stopped cold in his tracks and is starting at me. His eyes move from me to our leftovers on the table.

Thinking he is hungry, I say, "Come and join me. There's plenty of food if you want some."

"I get a ping when one of the brothers comes to the bar before opening. I came to make sure you weren't escalating your drinking problem again."

"I don't have a drinking problem and haven't in years. But I know you feel like it's your job to look out for all of us, so I'm not even offended that you're snooping around on me today."

Rigs sits down at the table beside me and starts in on the leftovers. He chews and swallows before asking, "Do you suddenly have a personal life

that I don't know about?"

"No. Look, can I talk to you about something without you losing your fucking mind?"

My club brother throws the sandwich I just gave him down on the table and gives me a disgusted look. "Is this where you tell me that you really do have a thing for Mattie and last night's talk was all bullshit?"

"Hell no. Of course not," I say indignantly. "This has nothing to do with Mattie. Why do you always have to jump to conclusions?"

Rigs picks his sandwich back up and makes a motion with one hand for me to tell him what's on my mind.

"Tell me what you know about the Henderson couple's old man." I didn't make the connection last night at the party, but in the cold light of day—especially after Joy had told me about his shady dealings, it didn't take much to put two and two together.

"Oh, he was a degenerate asshole. Siege and Rider both think he was in on the whole syndicate thing with them. There were several times when he could have, and by all rights should have, brought charges against members of the syndicate, but for whatever reason decided not to. He was a nasty piece of work."

"You know he died recently, right?"

"Yeah," he responded flatly. "He was trying his damndest to get out of charging his son with that abduction, but the mayor threatened to impeach him if he didn't. They were still haggling about it when he died. Some say that heart attack was triggered by all the pressure he was under."

"So, he clearly was a complete bastard who could have killed a woman or even one of us if he really wanted to?"

"Well, I don't think he would have gotten his own hands dirty, but he clearly could have had one of us killed if he'd wanted to. He was syndicate

after all. If you don't mind me asking, why the sudden interest in a dead man."

"He ran my old lady out of town six years ago," I state grimly.

"That would be impossible because you didn't have an old lady six years ago. I've known you since you were eighteen years old and I can vouch for the fact that you never had sex, much less an old lady in recent history."

I shoot him a withering glare. "Are you actually such an arrogant ass that you think none of us fuck without you knowing about it?"

He shrugs. "I'm an observant guy."

"Well, I was seeing Joyce Covington on the regular for almost a year. She'd just moved in with me and I was thinking about buying her an engagement ring when she up and ran away, leaving me a bullshit voicemail message breaking up with me."

"How in the hell did you manage to have a whole ass relationship without any of us knowing about it?"

I curse under my breath, frustrated with my best friend getting sidetracked about trivial shit when I've got bigger problems to solve. "Does it fucking matter?"

Rigs reaches over, grabs my coffee, and downs what's left of it in one gulp. "No, brother. I guess not. What do you need to talk about?"

"She told me he threatened to lock her up in prison and kill me if she didn't do what he wanted."

"And that sounds like something a man involved with the syndicate would say. He was a district attorney after all. No fucking wonder she ran. I don't see the problem."

Glancing away, I grimace. "The problem is I might have flown off the handle and accused her of not trusting me to handle the prick. She told me that she still loved me, but I didn't want to hear it. She left pretty upset after

that.”

Rigs glares at me, frustration and disapproval all over his face. “Did you or did you not make her cry?”

“Yeah, she did have tears in her eyes when she left here.”

The next thing I know, Rigs is poking me firmly in the chest with one finger. “That woman was trying to save both your lives and you threw her out, didn’t you?”

I nod, feeling like crap. “I just wasn’t expecting her to walk back into my life and tell me she still loved me. Said she’d settle for just being my friend if I could see fit to forgive her.”

“Holy shit. I don’t think you could have screwed that up more if you’d tried, brother.”

“I just wish there was some way that I could corroborate what she’s telling me. She said Henderson hired PIs to track her down. My heart tells me what she’s saying is probably true, but the logical side of my brain needs proof.”

“What did she actually say when she broke up with you six years ago? Do you remember?”

I pull out my phone and play the message for him. When it finishes, I ask, “What do you think? She sounds a little afraid, doesn’t she?”

My friend is gaping at me. “You kept her message for six fucking years?”

I growl, “What the hell difference does that make? I swear you’re getting on my last nerve today. I’m starting to think I picked the wrong brother to confide in.”

Rigs reaches over, grabs my shirt, and gives me a nice hard shake. “We need to fucking start again. This time, you need to come clean about how fucking much this woman meant to you.”

I shove his hand off and take a deep, steadying breath. “She meant

everything to me. She was my one, the woman I'd waited a lifetime to meet. I'd never clicked with another woman the way I did with Joy. We adored each other. After she left, I just couldn't make myself take any other woman seriously. She's the only one for me."

I clench my hand into a tight fist, trying to maintain control. "It kills me to think that she spent six fucking years on the run from human traffickers while I was licking my wounds over getting ditched by voicemail."

"You kept the fucking message," he repeats, as if I'm still not getting it.

"Of course I never deleted her voicemail. It was the last tangible link I had to her. Are you happy now that you make me spill my fucking guts to you?"

"Yeah, at least now I truly understand what in the hell is going on inside that noggin of yours." He rubs at his beard as he thinks the situation over. "I think we need to get Zen involved. Maybe he can hack the old man's financials and see if he hired private investigators to pursue her."

I let out the breath I didn't realize I was holding. "Yeah, that's a good plan. Let's do that."

Rigs tilts his head slightly and asks, "If you can verify her story, you're gonna take her back, right?"

I'm nodding before he even gets the words out. "Of course I fucking am. She's my one, remember?"

"Yeah, well, take it slow this time. No buying rings before she meets your club brothers."

We head to the clubhouse to meet up with Zen and by the time we're done explaining the whole situation to him and swearing him to secrecy, Siege, Rider, Smoke, and Tank are involved.

Smoke volunteers to call our police contact. "I'll ask for the inside scoop on the old man and double check to make sure the arraignment has been set

for Brent and Liza Henderson.”

Tank frowns, looking more disgruntled than I can remember him being. “I still can’t believe you didn’t let me take a crack at those two assholes. You know my wife still has nightmares about being abducted by them.”

Siege shoots back, “You should be thanking me. Our contact at the local PD says the FBI opened a case on the syndicate and things are about to get real for them. The last thing you need is to get caught killing one of them. You’d end up sitting a jail cell right beside them.”

“I’d be willing to risk it,” Tank grumbles. “They’re responsible for the most horrific event in Ivy’s life and that shouldn’t go unpunished.”

“And your asshole nephew was involved too. Don’t forget about him,” Smoke teases Tank.

“His old man spent a hundred grand to bail that little snot out. If he doesn’t show back up for court, I’ve already alerted my family that I’ll track the little prick down like a fucking bloodhound and they are not going to like what I do when I find him.”

Rider quips, “You sound like you just fucking want to punch someone. I’ll help you work out that aggression with some sparring, if you want.”

Tank almost smiles at our sergeant at arms. “I wouldn’t want to accidentally hurt you.”

“Don’t worry,” Rider responds happily. “You won’t. I promise to go easy on you, though.”

Zen breaks through the chatter. “I think I found something. You’re not going to believe this, but he charged several PI firms on his fucking credit card.”

“No way. God, that’s criminally stupid.” Siege’s opinion mirrors my own. “Go back and see if you can tell how much he spent over the last six years, or if he even had them looking the entire time.”

I begin pacing with my arms folded over my chest. I can't believe Joy came to me the first chance she got and was honest with me but I didn't believe her. Fucking hell, I'm the world's biggest idiot.

"Wow, it looks like he charged almost a quarter of million dollars. Who even knew a district attorney would have that kind of money to blow?"

Rider glances over Zen's shoulder at the screen. "This is crazy, man. Wait, I recognize one of those firms. One of Stark's crew owns it. I'll bet if we asked nicely, they might share information."

Siege walks off with his cell phone to make that call.

I can't get my head around the old man spending that kind of money on his credit card to track down a woman down just to leverage her into sex. Something about this isn't adding up and I'm not going to stop until I figure out what it is.

While my club brothers search for information to make this situation make sense, I just keep pacing and trying to fit the pieces together in my mind. It feels like I'm missing something critical.

Siege comes back with information. "Stark put the PI who performed the search on the phone. His name was Shield and he reported the old man told them to spare no expense in finding his long-lost granddaughter. He says Henderson threw money at them left and right."

"Joy is not his fucking granddaughter," I bark. "She said he tried to put his hands on her and told her that moving forward, she would have sex where and when he told her to. He was clearly a sexual predator."

The expression on Siege's face slowly shifts to one of shock. "He really was absolute garbage. I'm sure he preferred being seen as a rich older man desperate to make contact with his grandchild rather than a predator looking to abuse a woman."

My shoulders relax a little. "Yeah, that sounds about right." I'm glad none of my club brothers are believing the bullshit old man Henderson was

spewing.

“Want to know something else interesting?” Without waiting for us to answer, he adds, “The PI says his firm was paid upwards of two hundred grand, mostly in cash from the old man’s home safe.”

I ask, “Why in the hell did he want Joy so badly?”

Rigs speaks up, “When it comes to predators, it’s never going to make sense. They’re warped, mercurial people who probably don’t know why they do the things they do. So, what hope do we have of figuring it out?”

“Yeah,” I grumble. “You’re probably right about that. It’s weird how the father and both of his sons turned out to be such pieces of shit. Then again, I guess if they’re all involved in the syndicate, they would be, though.”

“Yeah, that makes sense,” Rigs agrees. “Look, Dutch, why don’t we go for a long ride to clear our heads while Zen finishes the rest of his research on Henderson?”

“I could use some time to think. Thanks, brother.”

Rigs, Tank, and I end up making a road trip up the coast. It’s our go-to route when we want to ride the open road and enjoy some fresh air. Try as hard as I might, I can’t think of anything but Joy.

The thought of her always looking over her shoulder, fearful and afraid, tears a gigantic hole in my soul. I should have been there for her, protected her. I searched

for her for almost two years after she left. Never found so much as a trace of her. It’s like she dropped right off the face of the earth.

I can’t help but wonder how she survived. I hope she didn’t have to go hungry, sleep rough, or do things she didn’t want to do to make it on the streets. Joy is just such a sweet, caring person. She’s the last person on earth to deserve some old rich dude preying on her that way. I decide right then and there, no matter what our investigation reveals or what she’s had to do to survive, I want her back. I’m going to spend the rest of her life making all

that hardship up to her.

The only thing I need to figure out is how to approach her. Maybe I'll ask her out on a date and take things slowly. Even though she said she still loved me, it's better to give her a chance to warm back up to me organically rather than just expecting her to pick up where we left off. I want her to feel loved and valued. I don't want her to feel pressured or like she has to share intimacy with me to keep me interested. When it comes to Joy, her feelings mean everything to me.

Chapter 6

Joy

I'm thrilled when Dutch calls me and asks me out to dinner. I couldn't agree fast enough. He's taking me to a fancy restaurant and everything.

Naturally, my sister is excited for me. She loves helping me decide what to wear. Once I've tried on all my own clothing, she begins pulling out cute little dresses from her own closet. "I think the blue one goes with your eyes," she says. "But then again, you can't go wrong with a little black dress. Try them both."

I reach for them, marveling at how luxurious the fabric is. "Thanks, Tiffany. The best part of getting my life back is sister time with you."

She laughs. "Hopefully, it will soon be getting sexy time with your hot biker."

I don't dare hope for more than a friendship, because getting my hopes up after he sent me way seems like a seriously bad idea.

I pull on the black dress first and stand in front of the mirror. "This is something I really missed, nice clothes. It's hard to keep any kind of decent wardrobe when you're on the run." I turn around to face my sister. "And pointless too. Going places that required a nice cocktail dress was the last thing on my mind."

My sister hands me a glass of champagne. Then she clinks her glass with mine and makes a toast. "Here's to getting back every single thing that crabby old bastard stole from you."

We both drink to that and I set my glass aside. My sister has a penchant for celebrating, but I didn't want to leave the house for my date staggering drunk.

The doorbell rings a couple of times before we make it downstairs to answer the door.

My heart sinks when we open the door to find that someone has spray-painted the word SLUT on the side of my car in bold black capital letters. The crude, hastily scribbled word looks ugly against the white doors. I immediately run out and search the area, hoping to catch a glimpse of whoever did it.

“Holy shit,” Tiffany gasps. “What in the hell is this? Who would do something like this?”

I cringe on the inside, worrying that maybe this isn’t over yet. “Probably neighborhood teens. You know how edgy they like to think they are.” Even as I say the words, worry twists in my gut because similar things have happened before when Henderson’s men were getting close. But he’s dead, so, clearly, no one is paying them to harass me anymore. Maybe it really is neighborhood teens after all.

“I’m going to call the police. We’ll see how edgy they feel when they’re sitting in jail waiting for their parents to bail them out.”

When Chase appears in the doorway, I rush him inside, not wanting to expose him to the graffiti sprawled along the side of my car. He’s getting good with three- and four-letter words but I am not explaining the meaning of *that* one to him.

“What’s going on, Mommy?” he asks. “Are we having company?”

I kneel down to speak to him at his level. “No, I’m going to go out with a friend to do grownup stuff.”

“I don’t want you to go.” His cute little pouting bottom lip is almost enough to make me change my mind, but I remind myself that I’m building bridges not only for myself with the man I love, but also for Chase with his father.

“I’m going to visit with my friend, and you can spend time with Auntie Tiffany.”

His face lights up. “Can we stay up late and watch movies?”

I nod as I stand up straight. “You have my permission, but it’s up to Auntie Tiffany because she’s the one babysitting you.”

He gazes up at me. “Will you bring me back some fries?”

Bending down, I give him a hug. “Sure, sweetie. I’ll be sure to bring you a big pile.”

“Go out and have fun. Drive my car. I’ll fill out the police report if and when they come,” Tiffany offers.

“Are you sure you’re okay with that? I feel like I’m dumping a lot of responsibility on you tonight.”

“That’s nonsense. Someone came onto my property to vandalize your property. I’ve got my big girl panties on and I’m quite capable of girl powering my way through this situation. You concentrate on enjoying your first date since getting your freedom.” Tiffany pushes me toward the bedroom. “Go finish getting ready. Make yourself pretty. I’ve got this.”

I go ahead and grab a shower, get dressed, and fix my hair. I’m just finishing the final touches on my makeup when the alarm I set begins to buzz, alerting me that it’s time to head out if I want to make it to the restaurant on time. I pull on a pair of slingback heels and go downstairs to say goodbye to Chase and Tiffany. Chase has a huge bowl of popcorn in his lap and they’re bunked down on the floor, so he just waves and goes back to watching his movie. My sister makes the go away gesture with one hand, and I don’t need to be told twice.

My sister’s car is so much more luxurious than mine. It’s a treat to drive it. I spend the journey counting my many blessings. First and foremost is my five-year-old son. Second is my sister, who has been amazingly welcoming to me. And then there is Dutch. He’s at least willing to give me some of his time and perhaps friendship. If we get close again, I would consider that the cherry on top of the only winning streak I’ve had in my entire life.

At the restaurant, I find Dutch standing outside waiting for me. He's once again looking so clean and wholesome. His hair is pulled back in a ponytail at the nape of his neck and he's wearing his cut, which is spotless like always. This man is such a neat dresser. Even his boots are polished.

I don't mind that his expression is guarded. It only makes sense for him to want to talk before deciding if he wants to go back to being friends with me. I can't help but smile at him, though.

"Good evening, Dutch. Thanks for inviting me out for dinner."

He gives me his elbow and I slip my arm through his and wait as he opens the door for us. "It's my pleasure. I've been thinking a lot about you the last couple of days." He sounds more relaxed and open minded than during our last meetup.

We're shown to a table in the corner of the room. The lights are dim and the table has a candle casting a soft glow against the wine glasses and silver. The whole atmosphere feels warm and intimate.

After we settle down and order drinks, the conversation starts. It surprises me that he apologizes to me right off the bat. "I'm sorry I didn't react well to the things you told me the other day. It was just a lot to take in all at once."

I give him an uneasy smile. "I wish I could come up with some proof of what went down six years ago or what I've been going through while on the run."

"I've verified Henderson sent private investigators to look for you, just like you said. He told them you were his long-lost granddaughter."

Hearing that sends a wave of anger flooding my body. "His granddaughter? Not a chance. I knew both of my grandfathers growing up. Plus, he was pretty clear on what he wanted."

"I was pissed off to hear about his little face-saving maneuver as well. It's not like he could admit to being a sexual predator. No one would have helped him in that case."

“That man has put me through so much. I honestly hate him.”

The server comes to take our order, and when they leave, Dutch asks, “If you would like to talk about what you went through, I’m a good listener.”

I twirl my wine glass around in a circle on the table as I think it over. “I’m not entirely certain where to start.”

He pulls at his necktie. It’s thin and black, coordinating perfectly with his leather cut. After an awkward moment, he offers me a starting point by saying, “I looked for you for a long time. Did you know that?”

The look in his eyes is hurt and it’s all my fault. I handled our parting badly. I just panicked and couldn’t think of a better way to end things at the time.

I lower my eyes. “I didn’t know that. Look, Dutch, I know I hurt you. Even though I didn’t mean to, I did. Maybe this isn’t such a good idea, us trying to iron things out. I’ve had to do things to survive. Things I’m not proud of and I doubt you’d approve of.”

He responds firmly, “Don’t ever be ashamed of being a survivor, Joy. You’re strong and there are things you still don’t know about the situation that I have to tell you tonight. Things that will justify any measure you took to protect yourself while you were on the run.”

I freeze with my hand on the stem of the wine glass. “Things I don’t know about? What kind of things, Dutch? You’re scaring me.”

He lowers his voice even though no one is seated near us yet. “The Hendersons are a family of criminals. They’re involved in human trafficking, both women and children. Our club has been investigating them for a while now.”

“No. That can’t be true,” I say without thinking. “Mr. Henderson was this town’s district attorney. His job was to put criminals behind bars.” The second the words fly out of my mouth I feel like a complete idiot. I don’t know why I’m being oppositional on this issue, especially since he tried force

me to have sex with him.

“Yes, he was tasked with putting criminals behind bars,” Dutch says gently. “He also belonged to a criminal syndicate working in three states bordering California. His job was to make sure criminals working with their syndicate didn’t end up in jail for their crimes. Remember when you told me how much discretion prosecuting attorneys have?”

I nod, still trying to get my head around what’s he telling me.

“He used that discretionary power to try and force you into a sexual relationship and to help the criminals he associated with stay out of jail.”

“It makes sense in a warped way.”

“We’ve found them in other positions of power. One was a supervisor at child protective services. Her job was to cover up the paper trail on kids who had gone missing in the system. She wound up dead because word got out about what they were up to.”

“And you’re sure Mr. Henderson was part of this criminal organization?”

“Our IT guy is looking through cases he dropped over the last couple of years, and from what we can tell, he was in up to his eyeballs. One of his sons just got arrested a few weeks ago for abducting a pregnant woman. They caught the whole thing on a traffic cam. The mayor was fighting with Henderson about recusing himself from the case because of being the perpetrator’s father. They think the stress of dealing with that is what caused his heart attack.”

“So, both of them were involved?”

“Yes. Henderson also has another son, David. He’s a rather well known children’s rights advocate in Las Salinas County. It’s a position that allows him to access information on which kids are particularly vulnerable and easy to exploit. We think David is the regional director for their operation here.”

“So the three of them had a racket going where they exploited women and

children. I'm damn lucky they never caught up with us. God only knows what would have happened."

"You keep saying *we* and *us*."

I take a sip of wine. "I meant me, of course."

I can tell by his expression that he's suspicious but, thankfully, he lets it go. "My entire club is astounded at how effective you were at staying a step ahead of them. You made yourself disappear."

"Oh, that part wasn't too hard. I have a relative who is a shut in. She's a couple of years older than me and ended up with a bunch of phobias and a small inheritance that takes care of her needs. She offered me her identity. She's weighs considerably more than me, so when I used her driver's license, I just told people I had lost a bunch of weight and that was that."

I take another sip of my wine and continue. "I got a job working from home, used a VPN to make sure my IP address was located in her city and then just kept on the move. I'm certain the PIs never thought I'd do something like that. Then again, almost no one knows she's a shut in. I felt it was the best way to ensure as much anonymity as possible."

"Where did you stay?"

"Mostly rentals owned by individuals rather than corporations. A couple of times early on I had to sleep in my car. Thank goodness I found ways around that. I always made sure we were flush with money and somehow managed to keep a decent car on the road."

"What kind of work kept you flush with cash?"

"I worked as paralegal advisor. Some law firms have numbers you can call to ask basic questions. They are more like referral lines to drum up business. I was good at it and made regular bonuses."

"You make it all sound so effortless."

"After dealing with law school and a prick like Henderson, living on the

run was scary and stressful at times, but earning a living wasn't all that difficult. I guess it's all in how you think about it."

"Well, I'm really proud of you for surviving against nearly impossible odds. It shows how smart and resourceful you are."

"I just can't believe the entire Henderson family turned out to be such degenerates."

"Well, it's two down and one to go."

"I've never met his sons, but if they're anything at all like their father, they need to be arrested."

"This brings up another concern I have." We wait while the server delivers our food and then pick back up with the thread of the conversation. "As long as David is still running around free, I want you to be extra careful. Would you consider staying at the clubhouse for a couple of months?"

"Oh, I couldn't do that. We're staying with my sister."

Dutch raises one eyebrow and I realize almost immediately that I said we again. Straightening my plate and flatware, I force myself to meet his eyes. "I was hesitant to tell you that I ended up having a son while on the run. I know that nice people sometimes look down on single parents and I hope you're not like that."

His expression darkens in an instant. "Hell no, I am not like that. Shit, that must have been extra hard, being on the run with a small child."

"It was, but I love my son, so sacrificing for him was no great hardship."

"Well, you realize that two vulnerable women and a small child need someone to look out for them, especially since one of the traffickers spent so many years pursuing you."

"We'll be really careful," I assure him. "I'll make sure to lock all the windows and doors before we go to bed at night."

“I really don’t think that’s going to be enough, Joy. And I don’t think you really understand what would happen if they decided to come after you again. Remember the woman I said they abducted?”

I nod, unsure where he’s going with this.

“Well, they took her off to another state and dropped her on a breeding farm. I hate to tell you this, but they kept the women and took their babies.”

I start to panic internally. How in the hell can something like this really be happening in the world today? The only thought in my head is protecting Chase. “Alright, Dutch. Tell me what you think we should do.”

“I think all three of you should come to the clubhouse where me and my club brothers can protect you.”

“I don’t know that my sister would be willing to do that. She has a huge home that she loves.”

“Can we at least ask her?”

“We can ask her, but you’re probably going to need to explain to her what’s going on and answer any questions she might have.”

Dutch relaxes back into his seat. “I can definitely do that.”

I take another nervous sip of my drink before asking, “Would it be possible to talk about you for a while?”

He nods. “Of course. What would you like to know?”

“What have you been doing with yourself for the last six years?”

He rubs his hands down the front of his dress pants. “After getting unceremoniously dumped via voicemail, I haven’t been very keen on starting up another relationship. I went out on a few dates. Nothing serious. Mostly, I’ve thrown myself into my work and into my club.”

“What do you do for a living?”

“I’m an electrician, but I do mostly commercial work. The pay is good and I set my own hours. Plus, I get a bit of extra cash from some electrical devices I’ve patented.”

I can’t help but smile as I remember how he used to always be scribbling down his ideas. “You’ve got nice hands. I’ll bet you’re really good at fine motor skills.”

A small smile ghosts across his face as we both remember how good he was with his hands. It’s almost enough to make me blush. Since I’m in for a penny, in for a pound, I add, “I really miss cuddling with you. If you ever decide you want that with me, I want you to know in advance I’m definitely up for it.”

“I’ll remember that, my Joy. For now, I honestly think we should keep things platonic. I want to make sure you’re safe before I get distracted with cuddling.”

Dutch and I spend the rest of the evening in casual conversation, mostly about his club and my family. It was difficult not being able to see my loved ones for so many years, but now that I’ve learned exactly what I was up against, I’m glad I didn’t let my emotions lead me into taking unnecessary risks. If I had, my gut tells me I would have ended up in their clutches for sure. The thought of traffickers getting their hands on my child fills me with dread, disgust, and unbridled fury.

Dutch follows me to my sister’s house on his bike. When I invite him in, I’m not at all surprised to find my son is still up, stuffing his face with popcorn while he watches animated movies beside my sleepy-eyed sister.

“Oh, thank God you’re back. Chase can outlast me when it comes to going to sleep. He can out eat me when it comes to popcorn. And he can recite every word in every movie we’ve watched so far.”

I chuckle when she sits up halfway through her monologue and realizes I brought Dutch inside with me.

She quickly shoves her hair out of her face as I introduce him. “Tiffany, this is my friend, Xander, though everyone calls him Dutch. Dutch, this is my sister Tiffany.”

“It’s nice to meet you,” Dutch murmurs politely. My sweet biker might be talking to Tiffany, but he’s staring at my son intently.

Chase announces, “I’m me, Chase.”

Dutch crams his hands and his pockets as he gazes down my little one. “Well, of course you are. Chase is such a great name, by the way.”

My son practically melts with happiness. He reaches down to play with his feet as he nods. “Yeah, I like it. It’s a busy name, like running feet.”

Dutch turns his head slowly in my direction and gazes at me for a long and intent moment. I worry he’s going to come right out and ask me in front of Chase if he’s Chase’s father. My son is small for his age, I keep my fingers crossed that Dutch will think he’s younger and therefore not his child. I will tell him, but I need a bit more time to figure out how I’m going to do it.

“Tiffany, Dutch has something really important to discuss with you. I’m going to put Chase to bed and tuck him in.”

I quickly pick up my son and start walking toward the bedroom. I feel like I dodged the paternity question, which is good, because I’m not ready. I take my time putting Chase down for the night. I’m careful to turn on this night light, gather all the stuffed animals and place them around him on the bed, and tell him a story. These are the rituals that kept our life going when we were on the run. I’m loath to give them up now that we’re relatively safe.

I turn at a sound in the doorway and see Dutch’s big form there. I don’t know how long he’s been watching me, but his eyes are so intense that I can’t look away. He moves forward and holds his hand out to me. I slide my hand into his and allow him to tug me to my feet. He guides me out into the living room where Tiffany looks more alert now and slightly rattled.

“I guess Dutch told you about the traffickers.”

My sister lowers her voice so as not to wake my son and practically hisses at me. “Yeah, I learned all about the assholes who have been hunting you all this time. He seems to think you’re still in danger, and me by extension.”

“Yeah. I’m sorry about that. Tiffany. I didn’t mean to drag trouble to your doorstep.”

“Well. I don’t think an MC clubhouse is the best environment for you, me or Chase. I think that if Dutch is so worried about our safety, he should come here and protect us. It’s worlds safer here than an MC on the outskirts of town. I’m not leaving my freaking house and you folks are gonna have to deal with that.”

“It’s fine, I can stay here, and I’ll get a couple of prospects to keep an eye on the perimeter,” Dutch says.

“Are you sure about that? I don’t want to take you away from your own home. Don’t you have pets you need to care for or anything like that?”

“To be honest, I never bought a house. I figured why bother if I don’t have anyone to share it with.”

It hurts to hear him say that, especially because his voice has a ring of loneliness to it.

Rather than drawing attention to his hurt, I simply nod. “Thank you for agreeing to be my protector again. As you can see, I have more to protect than ever before.”

He nods. “Don’t worry, Joy. I won’t let you down this time. A team of wild horses couldn’t drag me away from your side. No matter what happens, keep your son with you and stay behind me.”

“And who exactly am I supposed to hide behind?” my sister asks, a touch amused.

Dutch’s face lights up. “I’ll pick you a nice prospect to hide behind. You’ll like our prospects. They’re hard working, make good food, and are eager to

please.”

“Glory be, please tell my beating heart to calm down. These are all my favorite qualities in a man.”

I frown at my sister. She has a tendency to get giddy when she’s sleep deprived. “Where do you want Dutch to sleep?”

“Don’t care. We’ve got five bedrooms and only three of them are being used.”

“I probably should sleep on the couch. It offers the most protective vantage point,” Dutch explains.

“You’re welcome to the sofa if that’s what you want. You’re also welcome to raid the fridge and the cupboards. Touch my champagne or chocolates, and you die.” With that fair warning spoken, she stretches her arms over her head and yawns, then wanders off to her room.

We both watched her until she disappears upstairs.

Then I turned my attention back to my protector. “Right. Let’s get you some sheets.”

“You have pillows and a throw here on the sofa. That’ll be just fine.”

“Absolutely not. Give me one second and I’ll be right back.”

I race upstairs to the linen closet and pull out a fluffy pillow and stack of bed linen, and quickly make up the couch downstairs.

“There, that didn’t take very long.”

His soothing voice caresses my ears when he speaks. “You don’t have to go through any special trouble on my account. I’m serious. There are lots of times when I sleep outdoors with only my clothing rolled up and stuffed behind my head for a pillow. I’m used to roughing it.”

“Well, you won’t be roughing it around me. You’re a nice man and you

deserve all the best things in life.”

“Yeah, I do. Just remember that when the time comes for you to open your heart again.”

I reach out and run one finger reverently along the edge of his leather vest. “You’re acting like my heart was ever closed to you. Just so you know, it wasn’t. I loved you every single day, even when I wasn’t with you.”

“Those are some very strong words.”

“How about you, handsome? Were you hating me while I was gone?”

“No. Of course not. But I don’t think now’s the time to be talking about this. We should be circling the wagons and making sure there’s no danger about. When we’re one hundred percent sure everyone’s safe, maybe then we’ll have time for heartfelt moments.”

“I’m willing to wait however long it takes. You can pencil me into your schedule anytime.”

Dutch gazes at me approvingly. “When did you get so accommodating and easy to please?”

“Being denied the one thing you truly desire humbles a person. Being forced to do without you taught me that I’ll take you any way I can get you.”

“You’re good making a man feel desired. Now go on, get upstairs and crawl into bed before I throw you down on this sofa and get reacquainted.”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing.”

He jerks his chin toward the stairs. “Don’t make me chase you away, girl.”

He stresses the word *chase* in a way that makes me think he’s insinuating something. That’s all it takes for me to turn tail and run. Like a scared little rabbit scurrying back to my hole.

Chapter 7

Dutch

Fucking hell, this night has been an emotional roller coaster. I don't care that there is no clear and present danger to Joy and her son. I don't care what she had to do to survive. Only a judgmental asshole would think bad of her for something like that. I don't even care that her sister insisted I stay here. What I do care about is Joy and her son.

I'm not deluded enough to think the small fry is mine—for a hot moment I thought he might be, but I'm a virtual giant and the kid is more like a normal size person. I reckon he must be around four, which again, would make being mine impossible. He's got his mother's pretty brown hair and smile and he's as cute as can be. Regardless of who his father is, the kid's amazing.

Something about all the time and effort the old man put into tracking her down still felt off. There were lots of pretty women out there who worlds more accessible than my Joy. Why was he so fixated on her? I was pretty fixated on her myself, but we'd been in an actual relationship, and I was worried about her abrupt disappearance more so than just wanting to claim her body.

I walk around the living room picking up the multitude of toys that scattered around on the floor and furniture. Each little toy is cute and soft. I've never given much thought to being a father, but after meeting Chase, I realize how much I want a son. It's fortuitous that he comes as a package deal with the woman I seriously cannot live without.

I look over the pictures on the refrigerator. Not a big family, but a happy one, it appears.

Next, I make my rounds through the entire house, except the occupied bedrooms, and make sure all the windows are locked. When I get to the garage, my pulse quickens and anger surges. Sitting inside the garage is a white car with the word 'slut' spray-painted across the side. I quickly look at

the paperwork in the glovebox and discover that it's Joy's vehicle.

I pull out my cell phone and text a couple of the prospects a short list of supplies to remove the paint. I do a quick walk around the property and find nothing unusual. When the prospects arrive, I leave one out front, send the other out back, and get started on her vehicle.

It takes the better part of the night but, eventually, I can hardly tell it was damaged. When I go into the kitchen to wash up and make coffee, I see Chase sitting quietly at the kitchen table. I hadn't realized it was so late, or early depending on which side of the night you were coming from.

"Good morning, Mr. Chase, should you be up at this time?"

He looks a bit guilty, so maybe his mom wouldn't approve of him sneaking into the kitchen. He deftly ignores my question but smiles at me. "Morning, sir. Are you a police person?"

I shake my head. "No. What makes you think that?"

"It's cos you have a star on your belt buckle and deputies outside wearing your kind of vest. I saw them."

I smile at him, understanding how he came to that conclusion. "We're not cops. We're protectors."

"I want to be a protector when I grow up."

"Well, I'm sure you'd make a mighty fine protector when you all grown up. Just remember to ask your mom and make sure it's okay."

"Yes, sir." He's speaking to me, but his eyes are roving around the room.

"You hungry kid?"

He nods, "I could eat."

"What do they normally feed you around here?"

“Ice cream.”

I chuckle. “Nice one kiddo, but you ain’t fooling me. Maybe on your birthday.”

He scrunches his face up. “How about bacon?”

I look in the fridge and find a full package. “Well, what do you know? Yep, we’ve got bacon.”

“Are you allowed to make it?” His hopeful expression is all I need to get started.

“Yeah, I make it all the time.” I pull out some bread and spreadable butter and put it in front of him. “Want to butter some bread?”

“Me?” he asks gleefully.

I nod at him. “I’m sure you’d make good toast.”

He reaches for the butter knife. “Can we make bacon and toast for my mom?”

“I don’t see why not. But your mom might want to sleep in this morning.”

“She doesn’t ever sleep in.”

“Well, I imagine she’s busy lady.”

Chase and I make casual kid conversation as I fry up some bacon and eggs and put the buttered bread in the oven to toast. I make some coffee and add cream and sugar how I remember she used to like, then we carry our breakfast out to her.

Chase runs ahead of me up the stairs and holds the door open. I walk through with a platter in one hand and a cup of coffee in the other. Before I can do anything else, Chase jumps onto the bed and pounces on her.

“Mom, it’s time to wake up. We brought you breakfast.”

Joy bolts up to a sitting position and grabs her son. “Oh my God. What’s going on? Are you okay?” She has a panicked look on her face and is clutching her child to her chest.

“Everything’s just fine,” I say. “Chase thought it would be a good idea to make you breakfast in bed. So, here we are.”

She slowly releases her hold on Chase. “Oh, wow. That’s wonderful.” Turning to her small son, she beams at him. “Thank you so much, Chase.”

She pulls a pillow onto her lap and I carefully set the heaping plate on top of it. “Everything looks so delicious. And there’s so much food.”

“I maked the toast for you, Mama,” her son says proudly.

“Then I’ll taste that first.” She makes a big deal about taking a bite of the toast and talking about how wonderful it tastes. “It has just the right amount of butter. And it’s filled with toasty goodness.”

I want to laugh at how she’s just making up words, but I don’t dare because of how pleased Chase is with what she’s saying. She hands him a piece of bacon to munch on. When I’m just about to turn away and leave them to eat in peace, Joy reaches out and grabs my hand, pulling me down to sit on the bed beside her.

“Oh, no, you don’t get to go running off. You have to stay and help me eat this mountain of food you two made.” Joy brings a bite of eggs to my mouth and I eagerly open for it. She takes turns feeding her son and myself, and slips herself a bite every now and then as well.

I’m surprised at how special the moment feels. For once in my life, I feel appreciated and included. Watching Chase nibbling on his bacon reminds me how lucky I’d be to end up as his stepfather. The idea of having a family of my own and that family being Joy and Chase settles into a slow burning need that I can’t shake no matter how hard I try.

Eventually, we finish all the food and I take our dishes downstairs while Joy and Chase get dressed for the day. After a quick clean up in the kitchen, I

go outside to check on the prospects. All's well with Roman out front, but in the backyard I discover Sam has some muscle-bound dude trapped under a metal folding chair with his foot on the guy's throat. Sam's too damn casual, leaning on the back of his chair scrolling through his phone while the guy grimaces and complains.

"Mind if I ask what in the fuck is going on here?"

Sam glances up. "Morning, boss. I caught this dude sneaking around with a can of gasoline and a blow torch at around three in the morning."

"And you didn't fuckin' think to let me know?" Fucking prospects.

"Figured you were sleeping." Gesturing down to the man, he says, "This fucker ain't going nowhere with a metal chair boxing him in and a busted kneecap."

I watch the guy twisting in pain. "Well, I'm surprised he's not screaming his fucking head off."

"He was getting loud for a minute but I told him if he woke up the womenfolk, I would cut his vocal cords. Shut him right up."

"Any idea who the hell he is?" I asked.

"I pulled his ID and sent Zen a close up of his face. His name is Jeremy Smith. He's an ex-con who ended up getting a job working for the state in some program that's supposed to give ex-con's a fresh start. Zen is sending you a fact sheet on him. Rigs is coming with a van to take him back to the clubhouse. Should be here any minute."

I snap a picture of Jeremy's face and turn back to our prospect. "You did good work, Sam. From now on, text me when shit pops off. I want to know in real time."

"Thanks for sayin', boss. And will do."

I send Joy the picture I just took of the intruder's face along with his name and ask if she's ever seen him before. While waiting for her to reply, I shoot

a quick text to Rigs asking him not to interrogate our hostage until I get to the clubhouse. No sooner do I lower my phone than Joy comes storming out of the house. She looks furious as she stomps over to the man who is still pinned under the chair.

“You. Why are you here? Henderson is dead. You don’t work for him anymore.”

He does nothing but give her a malevolent grin.

Before I can step in, she plants her boot right into his face. “You’ll leave me the hell alone if you know what’s good for you. I have a gun and I’m not afraid to use it you sick bastard.”

I wrap one arm around her waist and pull her back. When we’re back inside the house, I release her.

“I didn’t know you had a gun, sunshine.”

She’s still spitting mad but now there is an aura of fear and frustration mingled with her anger. “I don’t.” Whirling away, she starts pacing. “I don’t know why he’s still after me.”

I walk over, put my hands on her shoulders, and turn her around to face me. “Talk to me, Joy. How do you know this man?”

“I don’t really know him. The day Henderson threatened me, I tried to leave his office. That asshole wouldn’t let me. He called Henderson his boss and offered to hold me down so the perverted old man could rape me.” She jerks out of my hands and goes back to pacing. “Henderson declined. Then he asked if he could have me and Henderson told him not until I was no longer of any use to him. That’s when the old man told me that he arranged for you be killed by a cop if I had anything else to do with you. I remember running to the restroom and throwing up in the sink. I knew that thug was waiting right outside the door and if they took me away, it would all be over for me. I snuck out the bathroom window. I left without my purse, ID, or money. I just ran and kept running.”

I walk up and wrap my arms around her. She clutches me hard around the waist and I just hold her as I try to sooth her. “It’s going to be okay. I don’t know why this asshole is here, but I promise you that I’m going to find out.”

“Someone spray-painted my car yesterday. Do you think it was him?”

“Probably. I cleaned up your car. You can hardly tell anything was written on it, you should have told me about that.”

She pulls back and looks up at me. There is such unimaginable pain on her face. “I’m sorry, we thought it was just the neighborhood kids. God only knows how long he’s been hanging around our place. I’ve been here for days. What if he discovered I have a child?”

“If he saw Chase, he might have thought he was Tiffany’s. I’ll fix it so he isn’t a problem for you anymore.”

Wrapping her arms around her stomach, she drops down into one of the kitchen chairs. “I thought we were finally in the clear, that we could put all this behind us.”

I squat down in front her and take her hands in mine. “I know this has been a long six years for you, Joy. You did good, staying out of their reach. You don’t have to worry anymore because now you have me and my club brothers to look out for you and yours. Can you trust me to take care of this?”

She nods, but her expression is still worried. “I trust you. Just be careful out there, Dutch. Maybe he’s acting alone and thinks he can have me now that Henderson is dead. Or it could be he’s working with those traffickers and doesn’t give two hoots in hell about having me. He might just be looking to abduct me and sell me to this syndicate in order to make a quick buck.”

My hands grip hers tighter and I give them a little tug to accentuate my point. “He’s a fucking dead man walking, so it doesn’t matter what was going through his mind when he showed up here.”

“Whatever you decide to do to keep us safe, don’t sacrifice your own freedom to make it happen.” She pulls her hands from mine, slips her arms

around my neck, and hugs me close. “I couldn’t live with myself if anything bad happened to you,” she whispers in my ear.

I hold her close, realizing that she’s happy to let me deal with this crazy asshole but she’s not willing to sacrifice me for her own safety. Something about that hits me right in the feels.

There is a knock at the back door and I can see Rigs staring through the window. I pull away from Joy and go to let him in.

He steps in with a slight smile on his face. “This must be your lovely friend, Joy.”

I quickly make introductions. “Joy Covington, this is my best friend, Rigs. He’s our club preacher.”

She comes over and extends her still trembling hand. “It’s nice to meet you, Mr. Rigs. I didn’t know motorcycle clubs had preachers.”

He shakes her hand and explains, “I’m less of a club preacher and more like our most spiritually aware brother. Having said that, I am still a legally ordained minister, so I tend to officiate most of the weddings and such that take place among our club brothers.”

Joy’s eyes dart down to the hefty cross he always wears, and her expression brightens. “That’s pretty amazing. I’m sure the club is lucky to have you.”

With formalities out of the way, Rigs glances up at me. “Smoke said he’d hang out here while we take care of business back at the clubhouse.”

“Who’s Smoke?” Joy asks.

“He’s our club lawyer.”

Joy makes a surprised sound. “Your lawyer is going to hang out at our house? I hope he doesn’t charge you by the hour for that.”

Rigs throws back his head and laughs.

I just ignore him and respond to her concern. “Smoke is my club brother before he’s my attorney. We don’t charge each other for looking out for one another’s families.”

She blushes, probably because I just insinuated that I saw her as family.

Just then, Chase comes running into the room and announces excitedly, “The deputies caught a bad guy. I saw it out my window.”

I reach down and pick him up. “Yeah. Now, we have to take him to jail. Do you think you can hang out here with your mom and aunt until I get back?”

“Yeah. I want to be a law guy when I grow big.”

“Well, in the meantime, you can practice making good decisions by doing what your mama asks, okay?”

He nods enthusiastically and Joy takes her son from my arms. “We’ll be here waiting for you to get back from dropping that bad guy you caught off at jail. Hope he doesn’t give you any trouble.” She stresses the word *trouble* like she’s warning me to watch out for some.

I give her a quick kiss on the cheek and Chase a pat on the head before Rigs and I take off.

Chapter 8

Dutch

We've taken less than five steps from the door when Rigs hisses at me, "Want to tell me what in the actual fuck that was about?"

I shoot him an annoyed look. "It was exactly what it looked like, me trying to reassure a scared woman that everything was gonna be okay. It was nothing more and nothing less, so I don't know why you're making such a big deal about it."

"I'm not talking about that," my friend says. "I'm talking about that little boy that ran right into your arms."

"What about him? He's Joy's son. Chase is a real sweet kid."

"Are you telling me that you haven't noticed how much he looks like you?" The incredulousness in Rigs' voice takes me by surprise.

I snort a laugh at his ridiculous insinuation. "What the hell are you talking about? That boy is the spitting image of his mother."

"Yeah, and you. I can't believe you don't see it."

"To be honest, the thought did enter my mind, but then I realized he's too young. Joy left six years ago. He'd have to be a little older than five years old to be mine. As you can see, he might be as cute as a button, but he looks around the size of Rider's daughter Amy and she's four and a half. Clearly, he's not mine."

"You can't go by what size he is physically. He runs around and talks like a kid getting ready to start kindergarten."

Rigs sounds so serious that I start second guessing myself. "If he were mine, Joy would have said so by now."

“Did she ever say he wasn’t yours?” Rigs’ demanding tone forces me to consider if there is some merit to what he is saying.

Before I can formulate a reply, Smoke comes jogging over to us. “I’ve cleared my schedule for the day. Plus, Sam and Roman will be here. If anything else happens, I’ll let you know immediately.”

“Thanks for looking out for Joy, Smoke. I appreciate it.”

“No problem. Hope you get some good intel from him.”

“I have no doubt we will,” I reply grimly.

I jump in the van with Rigs so I can manage the prisoner while he drives. I think Sam broke a few of his ribs when he was trapped under the chair. His face is pretty messed up, what with Sam whaling on him and Joy kicking the stupid fucker in the face. I don’t feel a bit sorry for him after hearing that he asked to rape her. As far as I’m concerned, after showing up at her home with fuel and a blowtorch, his life is forfeit.

I don’t know why the world has to be so fucked up. I get tired of beating information out of people and having to deal out justice because the authorities are too corrupt to do their damn jobs. Although nothing about what I’m about to do excites me, I’m going to do it because when vulnerable people like Joy and Chase can’t get their own justice, it falls to men like Rigs and me.

I also think about what Rigs said about Chase seeming mature for his size. I guess it’s possible that he takes after his small-boned mother. If that were the case, he might very well be mine. Joy hasn’t said one way or the other. Maybe it’s because I’ve been standoffish with her, and she doesn’t feel comfortable telling me until she’s sure I’m going to stick with her.

I’ll bet my last dollar that if I came right out and asked, she’d tell me the truth. She’s got an honest streak a mile wide running through her soul. It’s one of the things I like best about her. I decide that when I’m finished with this asshole, I’m going to go straight back to her place and have a little talk with her.

Rigs pulls around the back of the clubhouse and parks. When I uncuff our prisoner from the rail running down the side of the van and pull him out onto the pavement, Rigs says, “We’re taking him to the shed, not the cells downstairs.”

Something about the tone of his voice catches my attention. “Why? What’s going on?”

We were halfway to the shed when I noticed Siege and Tank hanging out on some spare tires, clearly waiting for us. They walk up to either side of the now struggling prisoner and began pulling him toward the shed.

“This fucker works for the syndicate. He ain’t walkin’ out of here alive,” Rigs explains.

By the time Rigs and I make it into the shed, Jeremy’s hands have been tied above his head and his feet are barely touching the floor. He’s twisting around and cursing a blue streak.

Rigs slaps him hard on the back of the head and says, “Shut the fuck up unless you want me to break your jaw so I don’t have to listen to all that damn nonsense.”

The man locks his jaw shut, but if looks could kill, my friend would have been dead.

Siege starts the questioning as he opens the duffle bag at his feet and pulls out a bunch of items. “I want to know why you were messing around the house we found you at earlier.”

When Jeremy says nothing, Rigs slaps him across the back of the head again. “Talk, dickhead. We don’t have all day.”

“I was just messing around. I didn’t know who lived there.”

I slap him across the face. “Liar. One of the women there knew you. She said you worked for DA Henderson.”

“That was a long time ago.”

I slap him again, trying to pace myself by not making it too hard. “Try again. You were there when he tried to force her into becoming his mistress. You even asked to have a turn with her.”

“The old man was impotent. Kept thinking if he could find one young enough, pretty enough, and feisty enough, he’d be able to get over his little problem.”

“So, my Joy was the only one that made his wrinkly wilting dick hard. Is that what you’re saying?”

“Yeah. He was so fucking excited to find that out. It made his fucking day. Daydreamed about making babies with her. Wanted a daughter after having all sons.”

“Was that the reason he went after her so hard? He was chasing his youth and wanted another kid?” That made a certain kind of sense. An older man who was losing his pride along with his virility might go to extremes to recapture his sense of manhood. Then again, knowing what sick fucks the syndicate were, I suspected him wanting a daughter had little to do with pride and everything to do with him being fucking pedo scum.

The man nodded and rubbed the blood off his face onto the sleeve of his shirt. It was awkward because of the way he was tied up. “Yeah. There, I told you what you wanted to know. You can let me go now.”

Siege lifted the blow torch for him to see. “Not quite. Why did you bring a blow torch to their house?”

“The same reason you have me trussed up like deer about to be skinned. To scare the shit out of them.”

“Guns and knives scare people. Why go for a blowtorch?”

“Does it really matter? You can’t kill me. If you do, they’ll come for you.”

Siege fires up the blowtorch and steps closer. “Is this the part where you tell me that you’re with the syndicate and they’re too powerful to mess

with?”

“It’s true. If you fuck with them, they’ll send trackers. They’ll hunt you down and every member of your family. It’s why no one in their right mind messes with them.”

Siege brings the lighted blowtorch close to Jeremy’s shoulder and even I can feel the heat from several feet away. Our hostage screams as it gets close enough to burn away the sleeve of his shirt and singe his skin.

He pulls it back and starts talking again. “I think that’s what you intended to do to the women who lived in that house. You weren’t there to scare them. You were there to hurt them and maybe burn their house down afterwards. What better way to get rid of the evidence, right?”

“What the fuck difference does it make? The bitch has been in town for a grand total of five or six days. None of you can be so attached to her in such a short period time that you’re willing to risk your life, your families’ lives, and your club for her.”

I grabbed the blowtorch from Siege and fire it up again. “Joy is mine. She was mine six years ago and she’s mine today.”

“No, once Henderson took an interest in her, she became the property of the syndicate. It was only a matter of time before he got what he wanted from her and passed her on. That’s the way it works. You best get your head around that right goddam now, because if you learn to play ball, you get money, women, whatever you want. If you don’t, you wind up dead and getting a lot of innocent people killed along with you.”

I lift the blowtorch and run it down the full length of his arm before shutting it off again. I jerk his head back and look him in the eye. “I think you’ve been misinformed. The syndicate doesn’t do a very good job of retaliating. So far, we’ve killed upwards of a dozen of their foot soldiers, torched their breeding farm, and rescued all the women. Old man Henderson is dead. We got one of his sons arrested for trying to abduct Tank’s old lady and now we have you. It’s only a matter of time before we have your big boss, David Henderson, right here in our shed.”

Siege pulls me back. “Everything Dutch just said is true. If you tell us what you know, you might make it out of this alive.”

His cynical laugh fills the room. “I’m not walking out of this alive and we both know it.”

“Even if you’re right about that, there are easy ways to die and excruciatingly painful ways to die. There are fast ways to die and slow ways. If you want a clean, easy death then talk to us,” Rigs offers.

“What did you want with Joy? The old man’s dead. There should be no one looking to get their hands on her. Was this you wanting to have a go at her? You could have done that without all the drama. Why come after her at all? Tell me what I want to know or I swear to God I’ll flay every inch of skin off your body.”

“It was David. He was pissed that his old man spent so much tracking her down and wants to see for himself what all the fuss is about. I was supposed to grab her and make sure she had nothing left in that house to go back to.”

I immediately lift the blow torch, intending to light the fucker up.

Rigs snatches it out of my hands before I can execute that plan. “We got the intel we wanted. Leave the rest to me. I’ll interrogate him for information on the syndicate before putting him out of his misery.”

I shoot him an exasperated look. “Absolutely not. You’ve had to do this one too many times. It’s starting to eat away at you and I’m not having that.”

“I can do this one more time. You all have women to go home to. You don’t need this shit floating around in your head when you’re trying to be all tender and shit.” His words gut me. It’s so like Rigs to do the dirty work so we don’t have to. But it’s taking too much of a toll on him.

Siege puts his hand on Rigs’ shoulder. “Let your club brothers handle this one, Rigs. I need you to come with me and brainstorm how we’re going to deal with David Henderson. He’s the only one left and the biggest pain in the ass so far.”

Once they're gone, Tank and I take turns tag teaming the bastard. I hate to say it, but I'm more than capable of being brutal when I have to be.

I ask, "How long have you been in the syndicate?"

"You're wasting your time asking about your questions that don't matter."

"Did they approach you when you were in prison? Offer you protection?"

"Yeah. They're masterminds when it comes to getting people between a rock and a hard place and exploiting the hell out of them."

"You were in prison twelve years ago, so that means you were working for the syndicate six years before you approached Joy for the first time."

"Yeah, I've been a bad boy for a long time. Knowing that gets you nothing."

"It gets me a step closer to understanding how they think, how they operate."

"What kind of work did you take for the syndicate outside of being old man Henderson's henchman?"

"I did what I was told at any given time. That's all any of us ever do. The shot callers give orders, and we obey, just like in any other organization."

"How were you compensated for the work you did?"

"I was paid cold hard cash just like everyone else. Was never consistent, though, and that pissed me off."

"Some were paid off in cash and women or cash and children."

"I'm not fucking like that, so for me it was cold hard cash or nothing."

Tank steps forward after letting me take the lead all this time. "We already know that David Henderson is the regional supervisor for the syndicate in this area. Are there any shot callers that work above him?"

“What would make you think they would share information like that with their foot soldiers?”

“How about the people who worked directly under Henderson? Do you know any of them?”

“Yeah, there were a couple more in this area. They keep us all separated, obviously, to make plotting against them more difficult.”

“How about other clubs, like the Hellfire Hounds? Are any of them involved with the syndicate?”

“David hates that club. The club president, King, is wildly unpredictable. We’ve used them before, but things always seem to go sideways when we do.”

“That sounds about right,” I say.

“How about any of the local street gangs?”

“The syndicate owns them all,” he responds, catching me by surprise.

“What does the syndicate do with their dead bodies? Where do they dump them?” I ask.

“Standard operating procedure is to leave them somewhere public in order to send a message. Sometimes, they go through the effort of making it look like some kind of gang-related incident, a home invasion gone bad, or the byproduct of some other kind of violence.”

“What kind of illegal operations does the syndicate have going on in this area?”

The man curses under his breath before answering. “You already know about the women and children. They traffic men as well, usually for manual labor.”

“Don’t waste a bunch of time talking about what we already know. What other kinds of illegal activities are they involved in?”

“Shit, they’re into everything. Gun running, drugs, prostitution. You name it, they do it.”

Tank asks, “How in the hell do they keep everybody in line?”

“They show us the dead bodies of those people who don’t do as they’re told. Seeing those mangled, mutilated bodies is a pretty effective motivator.”

“Tell me what you know about their top dog, Pope,” I demand.

“I don’t know anything about Pope. Nobody wants to get caught gossiping about him. We weren’t allowed to ask about him or appeal problems to him. We were told he’s all seeing and all knowing. That he has eyes everywhere and everything we say and do gets reported to him.

“Do you know what being captured by the enemy makes you?”

“A loose end. If you don’t finish me, they fucking will.”

I jerked my chin at Tank and he releases the restraints holding our hostage in place.

“If our prospect hadn’t stopped you, you would have killed two innocent people and abducted Joy a few hours ago.”

“It was nothing personal. I was just following orders.”

“That’s un-fucking-acceptable. Like you said, there’s no walking away from the things you’ve done, the lifetime of shitty decisions you’ve made.”

“I always knew this day was coming,” he says while rocking back and forth.

“I’ll give you a weapon and a few moments alone if you want to end this on your own terms.”

“I’ll fucking take that deal,” he grinds out.

I pull out my gun, remove all the bullets but one, and hand it to him. Tank

doesn't trust him anymore than I do, so he has his own gun trained on him.

“You've got one bullet and five minutes. Make the best of it.”

He takes the gun from me, and Tank and I back out of the shed. Within a couple of minutes, there was a single gunshot. When we open the door, he's lying on the floor with a rather large hole through the back of his head.

I sigh and we get busy cleaning up the mess. This whole situation with the syndicate is eating away at my soul. It seems that once they target you, it's damn near impossible to get away from them. I don't care if I have to gun down every single one of the sons of bitches. They are not getting their hands on Joy or her son—possibly my son.

When Tank takes off with the body, I wash up and head to our club meeting room. There is a long row of lockers down one side of the wall, each with a combination lock and a name scrawled across the front. I stop in front of mine. It's one of the first in the line because I've been here since the beginning. I lift the combination lock and dial in my number. When I open the door, I see a multitude of weapons staring back at me. I'm already packing and I don't need more right now.

What I'm looking for is the device that inserts a subcutaneous tracking chip into a human body. It's my own design, similar to the device physicians use to insert the birth control implant or the ID chip veterinarians use, but instead of hormones or owner information, it contains a small GPS tracking chip. It might seem extreme, but it's saved us before. After talking to the fucker who was sent to grab her, I'm not taking any chances. All my club brothers are chipped, and by not chipping Tank's old lady we lost valuable time in finding her. I pull out the small case and slide it into my vest pocket. There are several chips inside the case, enough for Joy and Chase, the boy who might be my son. I'm not going to let anything happen to either of them on my watch.

Chapter 9

Joy

We spend the day at home. Tiffany's anxiety went through the roof when I told her about what happened overnight. She's rightfully concerned, but at the same time relieved that we think we got the guy who spray-painted my car. On the one hand, it was shocking and scary that someone had been targeting us, but on the other hand, we were safer for having discovered who it was and removing the threat.

We spent the day painting a wall mural in Chase's room. Tiffany insisted that even if we moved out eventually and got our own place, she wanted to keep a room just for Chase. We moved him and all his stuffed animals into one of the spare guest rooms. My son doesn't particularly care where he sleeps as long as he has his night light and stuffies.

The sad truth is that he's used to sleeping in different locations and leaving at the drop of a hat. I've always phrased it as embarking on a new adventure and did what I could to keep it fun. With any luck, those days are behind us now.

"The dinosaurs are turning out nice. I never knew you were such a talented painter," a deep voice says from behind me.

I glance over my shoulder to see Dutch standing in the doorway. He strolls over, kneels beside me, and grabs a small paint brush. I watch as he begins filling in a leaf pattern I put on the wall earlier.

"I suck at painting. That's why I had to trace the shapes onto the wall from a gigantic coloring book."

"Well, it looks nice."

"I left you some dinner in the oven," I volunteer.

"I ate at the clubhouse, but thanks anyway."

“Oh, okay. Next time, I’ll text you beforehand.”

“That would be a good idea, sunshine. Unfortunately, we have some things to talk about.”

“Is it about the thug who showed up here last night?” I put the brush down and turn to face him crossing my legs.

“Yeah, that’s one thing I want to talk about.”

“Did you find out why he came here?” I’m dying for information to make the situation make sense, but at the same time I’m dreading finding out.

Dutch explains, “The old man was apparently impotent and you were the one person who got him hard. That’s why he was so relentless about coming after you. He thought you were the key to unlocking his personal fountain of youth.”

“Well, fuck that. He’s the last man in the world I would consent to being with.” After a momentary pause, I say, “That doesn’t explain why that guy came here, though. Henderson is dead. What possible reason could he have had for tracking me down?”

“Apparently, the old man spent a small fortune trying to get his hands on you, so his son, David, decided he wanted to see you with his own eyes.”

“This David guy wanted to see if I was really all that, right?”

“Apparently. The guy who came for you didn’t survive. He grabbed a gun and shot himself in the head toward the end of our talk.”

“I’m glad you didn’t end up having to do it yourself. No one should live with that kind stain on their conscience.”

“Yeah, I know what you mean about that.” After pausing for a moment, he says, “There are a couple of important things I want to talk to you about.”

I give him a tired smile. “Hit me with it.”

He slides a small black metal case out of his vest pocket. When he opens it, I see what appears to be an ear-piercing gun.

“Have you ever had a pregnancy implant, sunshine?”

“No, I used to get injections ever three months.”

“This device implants a chip that I can use to track you with.”

“You want to chip me like I’m your pet?” I can hear the self-righteous indignation in my own voice.

“Hear me out,” Dutch says.

I look at him thinking that my day is just getting crazier.

“It’s not like an owner’s chip, though the plastic rod with the chip is similar in size. The chip is like a cell phone’s GPS so we can track where you are in real time. We’ve all got them.”

“After six years of being on the run, the idea of someone knowing where I am at every single minute of the day is not very appealing,” I say.

“Look, I just told you the syndicate is intent on abducting you. The FBI is even looking into their operation now. This is serious business, Joy. If they were to incapacitate you, this would be the only surefire way for me to find you. I want you to let me implant you with the chip. I can get Doc to remove it once we put an end to the syndicate. Can you do that for me, sunshine?”

I absolutely hate the idea. It makes me feel like a beloved pet rather than a human being. Still, the last thing I want is for those assholes to find me out in the community and grab me one day. I managed to keep one step ahead of them six years ago by pure dumb luck. I think it over for a few minutes and ask reluctantly, “Do you feel like it’s really necessary?”

“Yes. If anything happens to you, you’ll be happy you agreed to it. It was only pure luck we managed to get to Ivy when we did—we caught a guy who knew the location of the breeding farm—if she’d been chipped, we’d have gotten there far earlier.” When I don’t immediately warm up to the idea, he

adds, “Siege chipped Cleo and all their kids. None of them have reported any problems. After a couple of weeks, all you’ll have is a small bump under your skin.”

“Alright. I’ll do it,” I eventually force myself to say.

He rubs a numbing cream on my arm, and as I wait for it to work I watch him glove up, open a clean needle, insert it into the device and open a new chip from sterile packaging. It’s a small, clear plastic rod and there’s a shiny metal chip inside.

His next words catch me by surprise. “I want to chip Chase and your sister too.”

My head jerks up. “No way. I’m willing to do this because I know there are people actively trying to abduct me. There’s no direct threat against Chase or Tiff.”

His lips press together in a thin line, and I hold out my arm. He swabs my skin with an alcohol wipe and quickly shoots the tracker into my arm. It feels a bit like a bee sting. He rubs a gloved thumb over it gently and asks, “How does it feel?”

“I’m okay.” I glance away, still feeling some kind of way about his insistence on doing this.

He sticks a small bandage over the site, removes his gloves, cleans his equipment, and folds up the packaging in his gloves.

“Was there something else you wanted to talk about? You said there were a couple of things.”

“Yes,” he responds calmly. “I wanted to talk to you about Chase.”

I feel like the rug has been pulled right out from under me a second time. “What did you want to know about him?”

“For starters, I was wondering about the disparity between his size and his verbal ability. He seems really young, but he talks like a five- or six-year-old.

What's up with that?"

"He was born six weeks premature," I explain.

"How old is he exactly, Joy?"

The demand in his voice makes me come clean. I swallow thickly because it is pretty damn clear where he's going with this conversation. "He just had his fifth birthday three months ago."

"That means you might have been pregnant when you left my bed six years ago."

I nod and force myself to tell him the truth. "Chase is your son. I wasn't sure how you would feel about that, so I decided to wait a bit to tell you."

I see the expression on his face turn mad. Before he can speak, I do. "Please don't be angry with me, Dutch. I know I should have come clean before now, particularly when the two of you were getting along so well. I was just worried that you would cut him—well, us—out of your life without giving us a chance to get back what we lost."

"I'll be honest. It's hard knowing I have a son and that he and his mother were in so much danger for years. When I think about how close the two of you came to being caught by those human traffickers, I want to track down every single one of those bastards and put them six feet in the ground."

I reach out to touch his arm. "I was really careful to make sure he was safe at all times. I kept him right by my side and focused on filling his life with love, good food, and happiness. He's turning out to be a really nice kid."

He relaxes under my gentle touch. "Oh, you don't have to tell me about my own child. He's amazing, intelligent, articulate, and so kind and decent. It makes me proud that he's mine."

I smile up at him, and he smiles back.

"The thing is, I want you to be mine. I wanted that all along but wanted to take things slowly so you wouldn't be afraid of me or feel pressured in any

way.”

I get onto my knees and throw my arms around his neck. “I’ve never been afraid of you, Dutch. All I’ve ever wanted was to find my way back into your good graces. I know we can’t pick back up where we left off, but if you give me a chance, I believe we can get back there eventually.”

He holds me tighter and murmurs, “Who says we can’t pick back up where we left off?”

I pull back and look up into his face, hardly believing that I’m hearing him correctly.

He twists one finger in my long brown hair and his smile softens. “I’d actually love that because I love you. I always have and always will. After experiencing how amazing life could be with you, no other woman even came close to capturing my attention. For me, it was you or no one.”

I launch myself at him again. “I love you too, Dutch. You’ve always been my idea of the perfect man.”

“I’m no way close to perfect, sunshine. But for you, I’ll sure as hell do my best to be the best man I can for you and the best father I can be to Chase.”

I’m practically vibrating with excitement. “No woman could ask for better than that, baby. Does this mean you’ll sleep in my bed tonight?”

“I guess it does, if you don’t think your sister will get mad and it won’t be confusing to Chase.”

I shake my head. “We can talk to him and tell him you’re his dad.”

He pulls back and gazes down at me intently. “What have you been telling him about me all this time?”

I squirm uncomfortably. “For a long time he didn’t realize dads were a thing. Then he realized that kids had moms and dads by watching cartoons. I told him that his father loved him very much, but he had to be in the military to keep our country safe. It didn’t feel like that much of a lie because you

were in the military at one time.”

He nods. “That was smart thinking on your part.”

I twist my finger in the buttonhole of his vest. “There is something else you should know. Chase and I have been buying gifts for you every Christmas and birthday. We wrapped them up and kept them in a box to keep them nice and clean.”

He tilts his head slightly. “Let me get this straight. You’ve been on the run with my child and dragging along gifts for me along the way? That doesn’t make a lot of sense, sunshine.”

“Chase understood we couldn’t keep a lot of stuff, mostly what would fit in our car, so we bought small, inexpensive things that would travel well. It just felt weird for him to have a dad but not buy you gifts or remember you on holidays.”

“So what you’re saying is the first thing he’s going to want to do when he finds out that I’m his dad is for me to open my gifts?”

“Yes, if you don’t mind. Just play along.”

“Sunshine, there’s no playing. My son bought me gifts and I can’t wait to open them.”

Something loosens in my chest to hear him say that. “I worried you would think me foolish for doing that.”

“Hell no. I think it’s possibly the nicest thing anyone’s ever done for me. I want to thank you for not telling him I was dead or anything like that.”

My mouth falls open in shock. “I would never do anything like that. It was awful enough not being able to tell you, I would never intentionally erase the idea of you from his mind.”

He stands up, then bends down and picks me up and walks off with me in his arms. “Well, sunshine. I think you deserve a special thank you for keeping me alive all these years.”

He walks into my bedroom and sets me down on my feet. “You go and get yourself a shower. You’ve got paint all over your face and hair. I’ve got some texts to send, and by the time you’re finished, hopefully I will be too.”

I jump onto my toes and give him a kiss on his chin, which is all I can reach given how tall he is. Then I race off to the ensuite bathroom and start the shower. Today has been both the worst and the best of days all rolled into one.

I hated seeing that asshole who tried to help Henderson strong arm me into being his mistress all those years ago. Just seeing his face brought back all the fury, humiliation, and terror of that day. Only this time, I wasn’t all alone. I had Dutch and his friend backing me up. Putting boot to face had never felt so good. I should feel guilty that he’s dead, but I don’t. I’m just grateful he’s no longer in a position to do to other women what he did to me all those years ago.

I pull off my clothing and step into the shower. As the warm water cascades over my body, I think of all the times over the last six years I had touched myself as I remembered what making love to Dutch felt like. It was a poor imitation of being with the man I loved, but it was all I had at the time. Now, he wanted me back. Said he loved me. No words had ever sounded so sweet.

It takes me a bit longer than I anticipated to scrub all the paint off my skin and out of my hair, but I keep at it, eager to get back to the man I love before he changes his mind about being with me.

Chapter 10

Dutch

Unable to contain my glee at all the things Joy just told me, I get on my phone and begin picking gifts for my son and his mother, who, if I had anything to say about it, would soon be my wife. I was all in. I wanted Joy. She had accepted me and nothing and no one is going to get in the way of me making a family with her and Chase.

Done shopping, I text Rigs. He was my best friend and it seemed wrong to withhold such exciting news.

Me: You were right. Chase is my son.

Rigs: I fucking knew it! What did Joy have to say for herself?

Me: That she loved me and she'd told him I was away in the military protecting our country.

Rigs: That's actually not half bad. What are you going to do?

Me: Marry her if she'll have me. We're officially back together as of tonight.

Rigs: I thought you were going to go slow.

Me: Fuck slow. I've already missed too much time with my family. I'm not wasting anymore time.

Rigs: You sound like a man who knows what he wants.

Me: I'll catch you in the morning. I've got shit to do before she gets out of the shower.

Rigs: Later, my friend.

Next, I text Siege to scrounge up a little vest for my son and a property cut for my old lady. Then I go to one of the local jeweler's websites and buy her the nicest diamond I can find. For good measure, I add a necklace and earrings. I discover shopping for Joy is a little more difficult. Siege's old lady loves spa packages, so I grab one of those for her and another for her sister, because I suppose women like to do things like that together.

Finally, I order a cake from the local bakery our club uses and text our prospects to make rounds in the morning to get my shopping, gift wrap it all, and bring it to the house by midday. Thank God for modern online shopping. If not for that, I'd be sitting there tomorrow opening presents with nothing to give my family.

I put my phone on Joy's bedside table and empty my pockets. Joy comes into the room just as I'm taking my pants off. She's eating me up with her eyes, just like she used to do when we were together six years ago.

"Do I still look like I did before?"

She nods, pulls off the towel from around her body, and begins casually drying off. "You look even better than you did six years ago. You got more tattoos and your muscles are bigger."

My chest puffs out proudly at her flattering words. I want to say thanks or something clever to impress her, but I can't seem to take my eyes off her naked form. Before, she was slim, and now she has womanly curves. Her hips are rounded and her breast full and heavy.

That's when I spy it, the evidence that she carried my son in her womb. I stalk over, drop to my knees in front her, and reverently run the tips of my fingers over the long, thin marks on her stomach.

She takes half a step backwards. "I know I'm not as toned as I was before. You don't need to point it out."

Her words make me unreasonably mad. "Don't you ever say that again." I reach out and pull her closer and rub my lips against her stomach. "I like this reminder that you carried my child. I wish I could have seen you heavy with

my son, sunshine.”

She freezes and mumbles, “I have pictures if you want to see.”

“Oh, I do. Text every single one of them to me. And all the pictures you have of Chase as well. I want to see everything I missed.”

“You do?” Her voice sounds surprised.

“Of fucking course I do, woman. This is my family we’re talking about.” I gaze up at her, thrilled to have her back. “Tomorrow is going to be a special family day for us. We’re going to sleep in and then have a party with cake and presents. It’s going to be amazing, a day we’ll remember forever.”

Her hands come out to cup my face. “You didn’t have to do all that, but I’m glad you did. Having a celebration of us becoming a family is the best idea and you’re amazing for thinking of it.”

I can’t stop smiling for anything. “I’d almost forgotten how easy everything was between us all those years ago. I’m glad that hasn’t changed.”

This woman of mine is radiating pure happiness. “I don’t think that will ever change, Dutch.”

I stand and scoop her up into my arms. She grabs me around the neck to steady herself. “Ready to revisit all that great sex we used to have?”

She laughs and kicks her feet in the air. “I was ready that first night I set eyes on you at the ball.”

“I was too, but my head was too messed up by running into you so unexpectantly.”

She grins up at me when I lay her on the bed and crawl between her legs. “I’m glad we got that all sorted out. I really want you.”

I lean forward onto one hand and murmur, “Oh, you’re gonna get more of me than you ever wanted tonight, sunshine.”

She pulls me down for a kiss and whispers, “Not possible, babe.”

When our lips meet, it’s like fate never separated us. Her eagerness is only outmatched by my own. Tangling tongues with her feels like coming home after being lost at sea. I can’t get enough of her. My Joy must feel the same way because she’s wrapped her arms around my neck and is running her hands through my hair, stopping every few moments to give my hair gentle little tugs that drive me wild.

I don’t know how long we kiss, but eventually I begin moving south, eager to explore the way her breasts feel in my hands now that she’s nursed my son. I feel slightly perverted taking such pleasure in exploring her breasts when I know they were originally designed for my son and not for me. However, in the end I tease her until she pushes my head downward.

Joy always did love my mouth on her. Sometimes I made her come multiple times with just my tongue. I know exactly how she likes to be touched because I’ve replayed memories of our lovemaking over and over in my head at least a thousand times over the last six years.

I not only know what she likes, I know how she moves and how she sounds when she’s in the throes of passion. Tonight, she’s making those breathless little birdlike noises that let me know how much she likes it when my tongue dances over the top of her clit and laps at the top curve of her pussy. She’s got a sensitive spot there that I’ve always loved to tease.

She moans my name as I tip her effortlessly over into her first orgasm of the night. I twirl my tongue around, lapping at her delicious arousal as she comes back down to earth.

“That was amazing. I needed that more than you will ever know.”

“I can imagine. I needed that too, sunshine. You taste like saltwater taffy.”

Her chuckle turns into a little squeal when I suck her clit into my mouth and slid one finger into her tight core and search for her g-spot. I find it within seconds and the combination of me licking and sucking her clit while I tap gently at her g-spot causes her come undone again within a matter of

minutes.

Finally, she shoves my head away. “You are far too good at that and always have been. Now come on up here and give me your peacemaker.”

I crawl back up her luscious body, amused by this new name she has for my cock. “Why do you call it a peacemaker?”

She laughs, but it’s more like a girly giggle that’s easy on the ears. “Because no matter what we argue about in life, a little dick from you is going to make me forget all about whatever we were arguing about.”

“You make it sound magical.”

“Oh, it is. Trust me on that, babe.” The earnestness in her voice is too much for me.

I get onto my knees and lift her until only her shoulders are touching the bed. Her hair is spread out around her head like a luxurious halo. The locket I bought her all those years ago is still hanging around her neck, warm and golden. Joy has always been the most beautiful woman in the world to me. I don’t see that ever changing.

“You good, sunshine?”

She grins up at me, breathless and aroused. My Joy seems pretty eager for my cock after just having two back-to-back orgasms, and that makes me the luckiest of men tonight. I waste no time feeding her every inch of my thick cock.

When I bottom out inside her, I realize she’s tighter than I can ever remember her being. This is the opposite of what I expect because she did have a baby at some point. Then I realize it probably has something to do with the lack of sex for both of us. I don’t think I’ve ever been harder in my life. My engorged cock has been throbbing with need since I climbed into bed with her.

I flex my hips slowly and Joy moans. “Dutch, you feel so good.”

“So do you, sunshine, I love the way your tight pussy is gripping my cock. This position isn’t too fierce for you, is it?”

She shakes her head. “I like it because it accentuates how full of you I am.”

“Oh, you’d be feeling that no matter what position we were in,” I tease her.

“I would say you were full of yourself, but I think I’m the one that’s full of you at the moment.”

“We fuckin’ or talkin’? Cos I’m eager to move.”

“We’re fucking.”

I shift my hips, pulling out in one long, steady move. “Love it when you talk dirty, sunshine.”

She brings her legs up and wraps both around my hips, impaling herself on my cock. My Joy is shockingly limber. How could I have forgotten that handy bit of information?

I drop down on top of her, holding myself up with one hand near her shoulder and say roughly, “Only one of us can lead, darlin’. We can tussle for it if you want, but I’ll warn you right now that I’m gonna win.”

Her legs relax and I waste no time rocking my hips just the way she loves. I’m careful to grind my body against her clit with each surge forward. Joy whispers breathlessly, “God, I missed this.”

“Yeah, me too. Talk to me, sunshine. You know I need to hear how much you love my cock.”

I pick up my pace as pretty words tumble from her lips, telling me how big and strong I am. How good I look in my cut. How much she missed me and never wants to let me go again. Being a man who has had few genuine compliments from women, getting them from the woman I love hits me right in the feels. It’s like she dials right into all deepest, darkest insecurities and soothes them all away, throwing in compliments about how hot and sexy my cock is for good measure. The things she whispers in my ear flip all the right

switches for me, bond me to her and stoke all the possessive instincts I've been trying to keep at bay.

Suddenly, I have her face cupped in both my hands while I lean on my elbows. I kiss her and our tongues twine together as I thrust roughly into her sweet body. Holding off from coming is more challenging than I imagined it would be, but I'm not about to shame myself by shooting my load too soon the first time she allows me to make love to her.

Joy doesn't make it easy for me. The way she rubs her chest against mine and meets every thrust I give reminds me what it means to have a woman under me. But it's the way her hands roam over my body and scratch at my back that makes my balls draw up.

"Come for me, sunshine. Let me feel you squeeze my cock."

My words push her over the edge. When her pussy clamps down around me, it's painful in the best way possible. Two more strokes and I'm flooding her with my seed. We're both so wet that when I slow my thrusts, it feels amazing. A lot of men are really sensitive after they come. Not me. I like to continue with slow, shallow thrusts until I get hard again.

I hesitate because I don't know if she wants another round. Her legs come up to wrap around my waist and she murmurs, "Don't go."

Happiness floods my mind. "You want another round?"

Her eyes pop open and she nods, quick and sure. "Yes. I forgot you could do that."

Oh, I fucking love this woman like I've never loved anyone before. Just hearing her softly spoken words make my cock spring back to life. I hold her close and roll us, putting her on top.

"You're turn to be in charge. I'm all yours. Take all you want."

She rests her hands on my chest and wiggles enough to remind me why I've always loved this position. "You're offering up a lot tonight. Sure

you've got the stamina for all that?"

I run one hand up her back and clamp around the back of her neck and pull her firmly down on my cock. "My Joy tank has been fuckin' bone dry for years. I'm all about makin' up for lost time."

When she starts moving up and down my cock, everything in my world tilts back into alignment in a fucking instant.

Chapter 11

Joy

I wake up the next morning and realize we've slept really late. Since Chase didn't come barreling into the room at any point, I assume my sister must have made him breakfast and is entertaining him this morning.

Waking up with Dutch's big, beautiful naked body curled around me feels like old times. No, it's better than old times. For the first time in six long years, I feel safe and protected. Having him back is a wonderful fantasy come true for me. I plan to do everything within my power to be the partner he deserves.

I can't believe how ravenous he was last night. We had sex twice, fell asleep, and woke up to have more sex a few hours later. I've never felt more connected to another human being than I did with Dutch last night. Making love to him was thrilling, familiar, and the thing that has been missing from my life. Being with him makes me feel whole.

"If you keep moving against me that way, you and I are gonna go another round."

I turn over to face the man I love, all smiles and happiness. "I don't think we have time. It's almost noon."

Dutch groans. "Fucking hell. Last night flew by too fast. I want to dial back the hands of time so we can stay in bed a few more hours."

"Aw, that's really sweet. Last night wasn't a one-shot deal. You realize that right?"

"Yeah," he responds with a grin. "It was the first night of the rest of our lives together. It's just hard to imagine having you in my arms every single night from here on out. I feel like the luckiest man on earth."

I brush my fingers across his cheek. "You always did say the sweetest

things. It's one of the things I like best about you."

"You had a lot of sweet shit to say yourself last night, sunshine. And don't think I didn't love hearing it."

"You deserve to hear how amazing you are every single day for the rest of your life." I lean over and give him a kiss. "Today is the day you get to tell our son who his father is."

His face lights up. "I can't wait. How do you think he'll take the news?"

"Chase is a pretty easy-going kid. Not much ruffles his feathers. So, if I had to guess, I would say he'll probably be thrilled. He used to ask about you a lot."

His smile falters for just a moment. "What kinds of things did you tell him?"

"I told him that you were brave, strong, and always told the truth no matter how difficult it was for the other person to hear. We talked a lot about integrity and how that was one of your strong suits. I talked to him about how you didn't like bullies and always looked out for people weaker than you. I also told him you liked the outdoors, enjoyed hiking and camping, and that you rode a motorcycle. The only thing I fudged on the truth about was your military service. I made it sound like you were still on active duty rather than that being something that you had done previously in your life."

Relief floods his expression. "You did real good, Joy. I appreciate you not making up a bunch of stuff that might have left him disappointed in meeting me."

"We both value honesty, so it made sense to stick to the truth as much as possible. Are you ready to do this thing?"

"Yes. Let's jump in the shower and get dressed. Most of the things I ordered for today should be here by now."

Being with Dutch again has me on a natural high. We can barely keep our

hands off each other in the shower but we make short work of scrubbing each other and getting dressed. I grab the box out of my closet containing all of Dutch's gifts and by the time we make it downstairs, Chase is standing in front of the dining room table totally all awe struck by the number of gifts covering it. Tiffany looks more confused than anything.

My son's head swivels around to look at me as we walk into the room. His eyes drop to the all too familiar box in my hands and he immediately asks, "Is it time?"

I slide the box onto the table and hold out one hand to him. "We need to have a little talk."

My sister takes a step back. "I'm going to make myself scarce and give you guys some privacy."

"Thanks, Tiff. I appreciate you being on kid patrol this morning."

"Not a problem," she replies chipperly. "Call me if you need me." Before I can reply, she's gone.

I pull up a chair for Chase, and Dutch and I kneel down on either side of him. I start the conversation by saying, "We have something really important to talk to you about."

"I'm getting a brother or sister, right?"

I frown at my son, unable to fathom how he came up with that idea. Before I can ask, he says, "Auntie Tiffany said I can't go in your bedroom because you're having a special cuddle."

"Oh," I say, and wonder exactly what my sister told him. "Well, that's true. From now on if the bedroom door is closed you need to knock and wait for one of us to say it's okay to come in, unless it's an emergency."

"Special cuddles make babies, it's what mommies and daddies do."

I glance at Dutch and see that he's intrigued by the conversation. I give him an encouraging look, hoping he will jump in. Thank goodness he does.

“Special cuddles don’t always make babies, and your mom and I aren’t trying to make another kid. Right now, you’re the only kid.”

Chase’s face crumples into a disappointed expression but he doesn’t argue the point. In fact, he doesn’t say anything at all.

“The thing we wanted to talk to you about is your dad,” Dutch says.

“You want me to start calling you that?”

Chase’s reaction is a bit strange, my son seems so matter of fact about it, so I add encouragingly, “Dutch is your real dad, sweetie.”

“I know that already,” he shoots back.

Dutch and I give each other a quick look. I ask cautiously, “How did you figure that out?”

Chase presses his hand against my chest, trapping my locket between my body and his hand. “He’s in here.”

I’m one hundred percent certain I never showed him my locket and I rarely take it off. “I don’t remember us looking in my locket.”

“You said it was from my dad. It came open when you were sleeping, and I looked inside. I membered his face.”

“How do you feel about having your dad come home?”

“I’ve been tryin’ to act right so I could call him dad.”

That stings. I blink back tears, unable to make words. I hate that he’s been thinking he has to earn the right to call Dutch his dad. That breaks my heart.

Fortunately, Dutch speaks right up. “Look, Chase, I’m your dad and that’s never going to change, no matter how you act. We weren’t waiting for you to be good to talk to you about this. Your mom and I just wanted to take things slowly and give you a chance to get used to me before we talked about it.”

I reach out and take my son's small hands in mine. "You're such a smart little boy. I'm really proud to have you for my son."

Dutch put his hand over mine. "I am as well. I've been wanting to come home to you for a long time, but being in the military made that hard. But I'm home now and won't ever leave you and your mom again."

Chase's expression brightens. "Alright, Dad." The tone of his voice is unsure, like he's trying the word out and doesn't know if he likes it or if we approve of him using it.

Again, Dutch has the right words. "I like the way that sounds. You don't have to call me dad if it feels strange. You can call me Dutch or daddy, papa, pops, or whatever."

"And you call me son?"

"Yes, I'd like to call you son. I'm real proud to have a family, and especially a son."

"You know what's better than a son?" Chase asks pointedly.

Dutch gives him a lopsided smile. "Two sons?"

When Chase nods, Dutch chuckles. "I didn't miss that look of disappointment when I told you we weren't trying to make you a brother or sister."

I jump into the conversation. "Maybe one day, sweetie. Now, are you ready to give your dad his gifts?"

Chase glances over at the box and nods. "Yes!"

It's the most enthusiastic he's been so far, so I quickly grab the box and open it. While I'm doing that, Dutch organizes the gifts he got us into two piles. We sit cross legged on the floor and Chase pulls out the first gift.

"Wow, I love the shiny foil wrapping paper and bow. It's almost too pretty to open." Dutch turns the gift over in his hands.

“You have to open it to get the present, silly!” Chase explains, then looks embarrassed like he shouldn’t have called an adult silly.

Dutch ruffles his hair affectionately, “Is that so kiddo? It’s been so long since I’ve gotten any gifts. Might take me a while to figure it out.”

He then starts picking at the tape, making a huge production out of it, as Chase starts fidgeting with excitement. Then suddenly he tears off the paper and says, “Gotcha!”

Chase dissolves into giggles, “You are silly Daddy!”

“Daddy, I like that.” Dutch’s smile couldn’t get any bigger, as he holds up the gift.

I remember buying the belt buckle.

“Oh, this is way nicer than the belt buckle I normally wear.” Dutch holds it up for us to see. “It’s got a motorcycle embossed on it.”

“Cos you like motorcycles,” our son states.

Dutch then gives each of us a gift. I notice that all his gifts are poorly wrapped and bowless. Then I remember he said the prospects were responsible for picking up his gifts, though Chase doesn’t care at all about how the gifts are wrapped. He rips into his and is gleeful to find a stuffed dinosaur. He loves dinos and stuffies, so this gift is a home run for him.

I open my small present and find that it’s a ring box. My hand trembles as I pull the hinged lid open to find a beautiful diamond engagement ring and gasp. I know a lot of women would have wanted a grand gesture, but not me. I love that he gave it to me in this moment.

Chase looks at the ring and mumbles, “Shiny.”

Dutch plucks the ring from the box and holds it out to me. “You and my son are my whole world, Joy. If you would agree to be my wife, you’d make me the happiest man alive.”

The thought of being married to Dutch makes me so emotional that tears begin spilling down my cheeks. “Yes, of course, I’d love to marry you.”

Dutch puts the ring on my finger then picks me up and puts me in his lap. I lean against his chest while Chase looks at us with wide eyes.

I explain quickly, “Happy tears. These are happy tears.”

“Okay,” he responds awkwardly.

“I promise your mom’s okay, son. How about you open another of your gifts?”

Chase is easily distracted by his hefty pile of gifts. I lean against Dutch’s chest and watch as our son picks through the stack for one. It turns out to be a rather large plastic truck filled with caged dinosaurs stacked neatly in the back. Chase is thrilled and starts playing with it.

Dutch asks, “Are you okay? I probably should have waited to ask you to marry me. I was overly eager and for that I apologize.”

“No. It was perfect. I wouldn’t have wanted it any other way. I don’t need big gestures or a fancy wedding. I just need you.”

“Oh, you’re getting a fancy wedding. No doubt about that, sunshine.”

I lift myself up and give him a kiss.

The next thing I know, Chase is standing right in front of us. “You’re not supposed to put your mouth on things. You said.”

I pull back from my shiny new fiancé and patiently explain the way of the world to my son. “I always told you not to put your mouth on things because it wasn’t sanitary. What I just did was a kiss. Mommies and daddies kiss on the lips, but everyone else kisses on the cheek.”

“Or forehead,” Chase responds. “You kiss me on the forehead sometimes.”

“Yeah, foreheads too. Why don’t you give your daddy another gift?”

We sit together opening gifts for the better part of two hours. It's slow going because Dutch is a really good gift giver, and it results in Chase wanting to play with each new thing he opens. Since it's the experience we wanted, Dutch and I are well satisfied with the way things progress.

The very last gift he opens turns out to be a black leather vest, just like the one Dutch wears. It doesn't have the Savage Legion logo on the back, but it has his name on a little patch on the front, like the brothers wear.

Chase reverently lifts it out of the box and holds it up. "Oh wow! It's a real deputy vest." Apparently, he has some fixed delusion that the brothers are all law men of some sort and that's why the prospects are guarding our house.

My last gift is something called a property cut. I pull it out of the box, unsure how I feel about wearing a vest that says *Property of Dutch*. But I know it's a long-standing tradition for biker clubs and I should be honored, so I thank him and try my vest on in front of him. I love the way his eyes light up when he sees me slide it on. That alone makes me never want to take it off again.

By the end of the gift exchange, I feel like a queen with all the expensive jewelry and perfume Dutch has gotten for me.

I make some coffee as Dutch unboxes a cake he ordered for the occasion, it's a chocolate cake with chocolate frosting. On top it says *My Son Chase*. Dutch places six candles on top symbolizing the years we were apart and lights them.

"It's not your birthday kiddo, but I want to make up for missing all of your birthdays and Christmases and to say I'll always be around for you and your mom from here on out. You've got six years' worth of wishes here, so use them wisely!"

To say that our son is glowing with happiness as he blows out the candles and shovels cake into his mouth would be an understatement.

I notice one gift left in the center of the table and ask, "Did we miss a gift?"

“This one is for Tiffany. My way of saying thanks for helping out with Chase and being such a good sister to you.”

My heart melts. “Oh, that’s really sweet of you, babe.”

Dutch grabs the gift and holds it out to Chase. “Would you like to take Tiffany her gift, son?”

Chase proudly stands and takes the gift. “I’ll deliver it right now, Dad.”

“Thank you, son.”

Chase beams at him and I know all the way down to my bones that they love calling each other *dad* and *son*. It’s sweet to see the pleasure they take in this newfound relationship they share.

Dutch and I chat as I finish my cake and he begins clearing up all the wrapping paper.

About five minutes later, Tiffany strolls in with an envelope in her hand. “Who’s buying me luxurious spa days and why?”

Dutch laughs. “I wanted to thank you for being such a wonderful sister to my fiancée and aunt to my son.”

Her eyes go straight to my ring, and she runs over to give me a bearhug. “Congratulations on bagging your hot biker, sis.” I hug her back and the minute we break apart, she turns to Dutch with a grin. “And thank you for the spa package brother-in-law to be.”

“You’re very welcome,” he replies. It’s only then that I realize he’s cut her a piece of cake. He hands it to her and says, “Enjoy.”

“I don’t mind if I do,” my sister quips as she takes the cake and shoves a huge bite into her mouth. “Oh my God, this is so good. I don’t suppose you have a brother, do you.”

Dutch is all smiles. “Not a biological brother, but I do have quite a few club brothers. They’re all very good men.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” my sister mumbles as she wanders off with her cake.

When it’s just Dutch and me in the room again, he wraps his arms around me and whispers, “Thank you for making this day such a pleasant experience, Joy. I’ll never forget it for as long as I live.”

My heart is fit to explode with pure happiness at his words. Our son is happily playing with his new toys in the background, and it feels like my world is complete. Everything that’s happened over the last six years is worth it to have this man forever at my side.

Chapter 12

Dutch

The last twenty-four hours have been the best of my entire life. Where I was once lonely, I now feel loved. Where once I was childless, I now have a wonderfully intelligent little son. Where once I was single, I now have a fiancée. Having a family that cared enough about me to go through the trouble of selecting gifts for me and carrying them around when they were suffering through hardships themselves feels special. I'm so honored to have Joy and Chase in my life.

That's why I'm furious when I get a text from Siege calling everyone to the clubhouse. The Hellfire Hounds MC caught two of our club brothers alone on the highway, ran them off the road, and set their bikes on fire. I don't know why they keep starting shit with us. It seems like they'd be more interested in running their shitty illegal businesses. They love making money, and they can't do that with us hanging over their shoulders, looking for a little payback.

"What's up, babe? You look like something bad just happened."

"Someone ran a couple of my club brothers off the road and destroyed their motorcycles. I'm gonna have to go to the clubhouse for a meeting to see if we can get the situation straightened out."

"Oh my goodness. I hope no one was seriously hurt."

"Both of them required medical treatment. When something like this happens, every brother and prospect needs to be front and center. That means I don't have anyone to leave here to watch out for you and I'm not happy about that."

She looks at me intently. "I'm sure we'll be okay here until you get back. We can lock the doors."

“Negative, sunshine. I want the three of you to come to the clubhouse. You’ll be safe there until I can get this straightened out.”

“Are you sure that’s necessary?”

“Yeah, it is. And, unfortunately, I don’t have a lot of time to debate the issue.”

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to be difficult. I’ll talk to my sister and pack a bag for Chase.”

“Pack one for yourself as well. We might end up staying there a few days. It all depends on how quickly we can resolve the conflict.”

I call Rigs, trying to get more specific information.

“Hey, Dutch. I guess you got the group text.”

“Yeah, I did. Who was involved?”

“It was Vapor and Haze. They were on their way home from working at the tattoo parlor.”

“Fuck. How bad were they hurt?”

“It seemed more like they were brawling with two of the Hellfire Hounds. Both of them had cracked ribs and were pretty beat up. They think Haze might have a concussion and Vapor’s hand got crushed.”

“That means he’s not gonna be dropping ink for a while.”

“Yeah, and he’s ten kinds of pissed about that. Both of their bikes were a total loss. Are you headed this way?”

“Yeah. I’m bringing my old lady, my son, and her sister. I’m going to put them in my room for now.”

“Sounds good. Look, I gotta go. I’ll catch up with you when you get here.”

The phone went dead before I could respond. The next thing I know, the prospects are knocking on the front door. I answer it. “You got the texts, right?”

Sam nods. “Are you coming?”

“Yeah, my old lady is getting ready now. I can’t leave them, so I’ve got no other choice but to take them with me.”

Roman responds, “Good call, boss.”

“You two go ahead and take off. I’ll be right behind you.”

When I shut the door, Joy and Tiffany are standing behind me.

“I’m not going anywhere today and you can’t make me.” Tiffany says with a frown.

“I’m not your keeper, Tiffany. All I can do is tell you you’d be safer at the clubhouse and that I wish you would come with us.”

“No way. I’ve lived here for years. Plus, you caught the asshole who was messing around our house. There is no reason for me to leave my home.”

“I don’t really have time to argue with you.” Turning to Joy, I ask, “Are you and Chase ready to leave?”

She looks really uncomfortable about leaving her sister behind. “Yes. Are you riding with us, or do you want us to follow you in my car?”

“Following me would be better. I’ll need my bike for whatever’s going down.”

“I already explained to Chase that we’re going to the place where the deputies work.”

I frown at her. “We shouldn’t reinforce the idea that we’re law enforcement. There’s a whole thing about stolen valor that we probably need to talk about at some point.”

“Yeah, I get that. I wanted to keep it simple because we’re in a crisis of sorts.”

“Good call. Let’s get moving.”

I watch Joy and Chase say goodbye to Tiffany and we head out. I don’t disagree that Tiffany’s danger level is minimal because they were never targeting her in the first place and we did pick up the asshole casing their home. But I’m the type of man that prefers to err on the side of caution. There’s always a chance they could show up looking for Joy and grab her sister simply because she’s in the wrong place at the wrong time. I’d hate to see anything happen to her.

When we pull up at the clubhouse, it’s total pandemonium. Cleo, Fran, and Ivy are there, along with their kids. Of course, they’ve been around the clubhouse before, so they aren’t quite as anxious as my Joy. Chase is proudly sporting his new leather vest and is all eyes as he takes in the clubhouse. I remember being curious about bikers when I was his age. It was a fascination that only grew stronger as I grew up. Siege’s old man, Claw, formed the Savage Legion. Me, Tank and Rigs were half his age, but we looked up to that man and were proud to start the club with him. Those were good memories.

I show Joy and Chase to my room and ditch our bags. Then I introduce them to Cleo, knowing that my club president’s wife will look out for them. Chase is already talking to their son Tommy, who’s pretty close to his age, by the time I drop a kiss on Joy’s lips and head to our meeting room. I turn and give her one last look before I enter. She’s following me with her eyes and looks all kinds of uncomfortable. When she sees me looking at her, she smiles and makes the get going gesture with one hand. God, I love this woman with my entire heart and soul.

I walk into the meeting room and switch gears. Leaving all the tender feelings of love and family behind, I turn my attention to the task of protecting my club. Since I’m the club treasurer, I sit at the front of the table with the other club officers and wait for the rest of the brotherhood to settle into seats.

Siege eventually calls the meeting to order. “Alright, we all know why we’re here today. Vapor and Haze were attacked by a pack of Hellfire Hounds on the interstate right outside of town. They were on their way from a tattoo convention in San Francisco. Rider talked to them at the hospital. He’s going to tell us what happened.”

Our sergeant at arms, Rider, stands up to address us. “Vapor reported that they passed four Hellfire Hounds who were leaving town at the same time they were returning. He said they flipped them the bird as they drove by and, of course, him and Haze returned the gesture. Apparently, that pissed the Hounds off enough to do a U-turn right in the middle of the road and chase them down.”

Rigs muttered sarcastically, “Four against one. Hellfire Hounds are nothing if not fair.”

“Vapor said one of them had a metal rod. He jammed it in Haze’s back wheel, causing his motorcycle to spin out. Then the guy did the same thing to him.”

“Where in the hell did that fucker keep a metal rod on his bike?” Tank asks.

“He had a rifle holder on the side of his bike and the rod was stuffed into it,” Rider explains. “Anyway, once our brothers were down, they ganged up on them. Haze and Vapor are strong fighters, but after a high-speed crash and four to two odds they didn’t really stand a chance.”

“What I want to know is why the hell are they starting a war with us now. King has managed an unsteady truce for over a fucking year,” I point out. “What changed?”

“Maybe nothing changed for King. It could be that his club brothers aren’t all that good at following directions. We all know how undisciplined they are,” Siege says.

Rigs adds, “I can also guarantee that King and his club brothers see themselves as still at war with us. They don’t need ongoing active

engagement to see us as their enemies.”

Siege nods. “Ain’t that the damn truth. The question is how are we going to respond to this act of violence.”

“I think we need to track down the four men involved and give them the exact same treatment they gave Vapor and Haze,” Rigs suggests.

“I agree with Rigs. Just leave King entirely out of the retaliation and target the assholes who attacked our club brothers. King is almost solely focused on making money. He might not even care about what happens to these four dumbasses who can’t seem to follow his lead when it comes to steering clear of us,” I say.

Siege shakes his head. “No club president alive will allow you to pick off members of their club without retaliating. It would be better if we could hit them where it hurts rather than perpetrate one-on-one violence against the four men involved. My best guess is if we target part of his operation, he’ll be pissed enough at his fuck ups to deal with them himself.”

“That does make a certain kind of sense,” I admit. “We’ve had to deal out a lot of violence lately. I’d appreciate the opportunity to switch it up. Maybe we could target one of their meth labs. That would hit him where it hurts.”

Siege rubs his beard as he thinks it over. “They have a lab set up at an old trailer just over the county line. It could be that if we took it out and drew the notice of police, we could take out a money maker and neutralize a few of their crew at the same time.”

“I like that idea,” I say with admiration. “Deprive the enemy of both monetary resources and manpower. I think this could eventually turn into our new strategy for dealing with the Hounds.”

Siege stands up. “All in favor of targeting their meth lab, say aye.”

Most every brother does.

“They ayes clearly have it.” Turning to Rider, he says, “I want you to case

out that meth lab. Take Rigs and Dutch with you. Gather intel on how many of their crew work there, what exactly are they cooking, and whether there are innocent bystanders nearby. Try to get a bead on how many weapons they have in play, what kind of surveillance they have and if the place is booby trapped.”

“You got it, boss.”

Siege turns to Zen. “I know you’ve been studying the Hellfire Hounds for a long time. I’d like you to compile a report outlining everything we know about their operation. I know Vapor identified the assholes who ran them off the road. Give us a short fact sheet on each of them. I want to track them over the long haul and make sure they end up paying for what they did to Haze and Vapor.”

“I can probably have that ready in twenty-four hours. I’ve got tons of information. It’s just a matter of separating the wheat from the chaff.”

Turning to the rest of us, Siege asks, “Does anyone else have anything to add at this time?”

When no one speaks up, he closes out the meeting. “Let’s plan to meet up tomorrow, same time. We’ll firm up our plans then.”

All the brothers file out of the meeting room, leaving Rider, Rigs, Tank, Siege, and me. We spend a few minutes brainstorming ways to approach the meth lab without being spotted and drilling down on what information Siege wanted. We leave through the back door, so I didn’t see Joy or Chase. This suits me fine because I need to keep my hard heart in place for this mission.

Chapter 13

Dutch

We wait until dusk and then surround the meth lab and move closer. I plant small spy cameras in the trees and point them toward the front and back door. Then we wait and watch with night vision binoculars.

After a couple of hours, five men come out of the long single wide trailer. They light a bonfire some distance away from the trailer and break out some beers. My best guess is they were not about to turn on a stove inside the same building where they're cooking meth. The Hellfire Hounds might not be too bright, but they're not stupid.

They prop up an oven rack on two rocks to keep it above the flames. Burgers and hot dogs go down next. I'm around twenty yards from the trailer and I don't see signs of activity within. The thermal imaging equipment we have isn't picking up any heat signatures inside the structure, so the minute they started eating, I slip inside to gather more intel. I pull out my cell phone and begin recording everything I see. There's trash everywhere, tons of empty boxes of decongestant pills and cold medicine tossed carelessly into one corner of the living area, and it smells strongly of cat piss. Another indication that they're cooking meth, as if I needed any further proof.

I make my way to the kitchen and find several large vats of chemicals slowly bubbling away. All the surfaces are covered with industrial-sized bottles of solvents, laboratory glassware and tubing. The smell is almost too much to bear even with the mask I'm wearing. The side rooms are empty, except for one disgustingly filthy bathroom with about thirty assault rifles all laying on top of each other in a damp bathtub.

When I hear voices at the back door, I quickly slip out the front door and meet up with the others to share information. Rigs sends all the images and intel to Siege, then we split into two groups, one to cover the front of the building and the other to cover the back of the building. We still need to understand their shift changes and how they transport the meth. This batch

probably wouldn't be ready for another six hours or so, but I'd seen the blocks of prepared meth they had stacked on the counter.

About three in the morning, a van comes bumping up the road.

"Are you seeing what I'm seeing?" Rigs whispers through the comms.

"Yeah, I'm fucking seeing it too," I answer, feeling sick to my stomach.

"These fuckers are dead men walking."

I sure as fuck don't disagree with him. Not after watching two women wearing the same kind of blue jumpsuits that the syndicate did at the breeding farm jump out of the van and pull out two teen girls. They don't look to be more than fourteen or fifteen and are obviously terrified. Fucking syndicate traffickers. How did they fit together with the Hellfire Hounds MC? Were they simply buying what the syndicate was so eager to sell, or was something more sinister going on? Were they trading drugs for girls to abuse? By this time, the Hounds who were sitting out front were pretty drunk, and I had the idea that these sick fuckers were gonna have a party.

Two of the men grab one of the girls and drag her into the trailer. That's my fucking cue to get my ass in gear. I make a run for the front of the trailer, slip inside as quietly as possible, and find the two men struggling to get the teen out of her clothing. They're so intoxicated and preoccupied with abusing her that they don't see me coming until I'm on top of them.

I do my best to knock them out with as little damage as possible. If an autopsy revealed they had been shot, stabbed, or had their skulls crushed, then the trailer exploding wouldn't seem like an accident.

I turn and find the terrified girl cowering in the corner with her shirt half ripped off. I bend down and tried to calm her down. "Look, we're not with the assholes cooking drugs in the building or the assholes trying to traffic you and your friend. We're gonna get you outta here and back home, but you need to keep quiet until we can take out the others. Do you understand?"

"She's my sister, not my friend. We need to check on her. They could be

doing anything to her.”

“There are others like me, keeping an eye on them. Look, there are a lot more of them than us. I’m going to pick off as many as possible.”

“Okay, hurry, though. My little sister was losing her mind. So am I, actually.”

“Will do. You know what would be great? If you could start screaming, maybe draw one or two of them in here to check on you. The more of them I get, the fewer of them are out there messing with your sister, right?”

She pushes herself up from the floor and starts walking across the room.

I stand up and follow her. “Get close to the door. Raise a racket. Then run for the front door. I want you out of striking distance. Got it?”

She nods, her eyes are wide with fear. “Yeah. Whatever you think is best.”

Despite her clear terror, she’s much better than I thought she would be. She opens her mouth and begins yelling for them to get their damn hands off her, saying if they don’t, she’s going to brain them with a lamp and all kind of shit like that. When we hear the back door open, she runs for the front of the trailer, just like we discussed. Only the Hounds don’t come rushing through the door. Nope. It’s the two women. Fuck. I do hate being aggressive with women even if they’re evil bitches like these two.

I hesitate for a second and a chair goes flying by head. It’s the teen, and she’s clearly decided that she’s got zero problem knocking one of the women out with whatever she can get her hands on. I force my ass to move and knock one of them out before she can alert the others. By the time I turn around, the other woman’s head is bleeding, and the teen still has a chair raised over her head. I ease it out of her hands.

We hear something going down outside, “That sounds like my club brothers taking out the other three. We better get out there and check on your sister. Stay behind me.”

I open the back door and look out. Rigs, Tank, and Rider have the other three men out cold. Rigs is trying to talk to the younger girl but she's freaking out too bad to listen. Her sister runs over and wraps her arms around her.

Rigs mutters under his breath, "This turned out to be a total cluster fuck."

Rider ignores him and speaks directly to me. "What's the plan? Put them all in the trailer and make it go kaboom?"

"Yeah, that's the most obvious way to handle the situation. Make it look like an accident."

"That works for me. How are we going to cover for the girls bodies not showing up? You know the syndicate's gonna be looking for evidence like that," Rider looks at three Hounds in front of us.

"Have them run around, leaving a bunch of tracks leading to the road. They'll think they escaped in the chaos. It's not a great plan, but it's the only one that makes any sense in this situation." I shrug, it's the best I can come up with.

"Tank and I will get the bodies into place. You two talk to the girls," Rigs says.

My lips press into a firm line. "I don't know if the younger one is gonna listen or let us take her outta here."

Rider shakes his head. "If they want to get clear of this mess, she's gonna need to."

"Maybe I can get her sister to talk to her, she seems less traumatized." I walk over to the two of them and try to explain. "This place is gonna blow any minute now. When they don't find your bodies with the others, they're going to think that maybe someone else was involved. We want it to look like an accident."

The older teen asks, "What do you want us to do?"

I gesture to Rider. “My friend and I are going to get rid of our footprints. After we do that, we want you and your sister to run around like you’re in a panic and then run out to the road.”

“You want them to think we got away and hitchhiked out of here, right?”

I nod at the older teen, she was smart. “Get busy. We’ll be ready when you’re finished.”

This is the weakest, most ill-conceived plan I’ve ever come up with. It is riddled with problems, but all we can do is try. Siege is not going to be happy about how we handled this, but with the teens showing up, there wasn’t much else we could do.

After the clean-up I put the older teen on my bike and Tank takes the younger one. We wait for Rigs to set off the blast, then hit the road, careful not to leave any tracks in the dirt or peel out onto the pavement. I have no doubt that we might have missed a few things, but with any luck, whoever comes looking will think it was the Hounds.

Back to clubhouse, Cleo is there waiting to take the girls. Our club president’s wife being a licensed social worker comes in handy at times, she’ll make sure that the girls get reunited with their parents.

I walk into the bar looking for Joy and instead find Mel tending bar with my son sitting on a barstool coloring. Something about this doesn’t feel right. Joy would never leave Chase with total strangers.

I stalk up to the bar and ask, “Where the hell is my fiancée?”

“She had to step out for a minute, I think to make a private phone call, she asked me to keep an eye on Chase.”

“How long has she been gone?”

Mel thinks it over for a second and glances at her wristwatch. “Honestly, she’s been gone for a while. Maybe thirty-five or forty minutes.”

“Did you see which way she went?”

Chase looks up from his coloring. “Something happened to Auntie Tiffany.”

I bend down to look him in the eye. “What do mean? Did you hear or see something?”

Chase nods. “Mommy got a call. It was Auntie Tiffany screaming, she sounded scared. My auntie hates spiders so maybe it was that? She told me to sit with the nice lady until you got back.”

“What? No, she just needed to make a call!” Mel’s eyes go wide, “I’m sorry, Dutch, if I—”

“It’s okay,” I say, my voice way calmer than I felt. It would do no good to get angry at Mel, she clearly had no idea that my Joy was leaving the premises.

Panic surges through my body but I try to hold it together for my son. “Alright, if Mommy said it was okay for you to sit with Mel, then it’s fine. I’m gonna go check and make sure everything is okay back at your home. I’m good with spiders and scary things. Will you be alright here, son?”

His expression is worried, but he gives me one curt little nod.

I lean over and give him a kiss on the top of the head. “Thanks, kiddo. I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

Chapter 14

Joy

I wish I hadn't panicked when Tiffany called me, hysterical about someone breaking into her house. When a man came on the line and told me to come home immediately or my sister would be in pieces, I made arrangements for one of the nice women at the clubhouse to watch my son and sped right home. I have the worse gut feeling.

It can't be anyone except the syndicate, this David Henderson person Dutch had told me about. He's the last man standing out of his entire criminal family. All the rest are dead or behind bars. I have a sinking feeling that he wants more than just to have a look at the woman his father was so obsessed with. He wants to punish me for running and causing his dad to aggravate his already weak ticker. Maybe he even blames me for this father's untimely demise?

I've almost worried myself into an ulcer by the time I pull into our street. Nothing seems amiss except a fairly nondescript van sitting in the driveway.

I park on the curb and make my way past the van with the intention of going into the house through the garage. I never make it, as the van door slides open and someone pulls me inside. Before I can put up a fight, my purse is thrown out of the vehicle and the door slams closed.

I see my sister lying unconscious on the floor, her hands tied together in front of her. I scramble forward and lay her head in my lap. Thankfully, she's still breathing, and her pulse is strong and regular. She was either knocked out or drugged. I hold her head protectively and turn my attention to the men surrounding us.

"Let us go. Why are you doing this?"

A man turns around in the front passenger side seat. He looks so much like my former boss that it takes my breath away. This must be David, his son.

“You look like a younger version of your asshole father.”

The man actually smirks at me. “You aren’t the first person to have mentioned that. I’m sure you won’t be the last.”

“I know your father had some strange, twisted fascination with me, but I’ve never set eyes on you before.”

David just smirks again. ‘Yeah, my father was obsessed with you. I don’t see the big deal, personally. Just goes to show there’s no accounting for some people’s tastes.

If this man thought he was hurting my feelings, he could think again. I didn’t give two hoots in hell that he didn’t find me attractive. So much the better in my opinion. “If I’m no big deal, then why did you just abduct me?”

Suddenly, the smirk falls off his face. “The same reason my father initially wanted you.”

“He wanted me for sex. You just insinuated you didn’t.”

“Wrong. He initially wanted you because you were sleeping with a member of the Savage Legion MC. You started out being leverage. It’s really unfortunate that he became obsessed with you. That fucked up the plan royally.”

Shock fills every corner of my mind. “You want to use me to hurt Dutch?”

“Is that his name?”

I snap my mouth shut, but David just laughs. “Of course we know the fool’s name already. You’re easy to mess with, though.”

“It won’t work,” I say, desperate to get him to rethink hurting Dutch. “He doesn’t even care that much for me.”

“That rather large diamond on your hand says differently, doll.”

“It’s not even a real diamond. Boy, do you have your information all

turned around.”

“I honestly don’t think I do. We’ve had your place bugged since you came back to town, staying with your sister wasn’t the cleverest idea. We know all about the biker’s son. You were smart to leave him behind. He would have been even better leverage than you.”

“I don’t know what you want from Dutch, but you’re not going to get it. He’s not going to let you destroy the club he worked so hard to build all these years.”

“Since you’re not going to make it out of this situation alive, I’ll tell you. I have no intention of destroying his club. That would be a waste of good manpower. The Legion operates like a highly motivated, well-oiled little army. I want to influence and control the MC. Dutch will do anything to protect the woman he loves, even become my man on the inside.”

I’m horrified at the thought of him tricking a bunch of good men into doing dark deeds. Finding out they had been deceived into working for the syndicate would be dispiriting to them. Though I really don’t see how his deluded plan would work.

While I truly think Dutch would do anything to keep me from being tortured, raped, or killed. His love for me is deep and true. But he loves his club brothers just as much, asking him to betray them to save me would destroy him.

I have to figure another way out of this for me and my sister. Lucky for me, I have years of experience in being quick and resourceful. If I’m patient and keep my eyes and ears open, I might find a way to get us clear of this situation. Once we are free, I can make us disappear long enough to put some distance between us and them until the threat has been dealt with. The thought of having to leave Dutch and my son is heartbreaking, but if it means keeping them safe, then I have to do it. Being close to me will only put their lives in danger. I haul in a deep, calming breath and center myself. I can do this. I’ve gotten away before and I can do it again.

My one source of solace in this situation is the knowledge that Chase is

safe with his father. I know beyond a shadow of a doubt that Dutch will never let anything happen to our son. I have always known that I would die a thousand horrible deaths to protect my son.

Glancing around the van, I now realize that I would also inflict a thousand horrible deaths to protect my son...and his father. It's an alarming thought, but in this moment I realize that I'm truly capable of killing in self-defense. Maybe abstractly I've always known that. Only now, it feels so much more real to me.

Suddenly, Tiffany begins to move in my lap. "What happened? Am I on my way to the hospital?" Her groggy voice breaks my heart, but the men around us just laugh.

One says, "Sure, beautiful, we're taking you to the hospital."

My blood runs cold when I see the way he looks at her. These men are worse than regular criminals. Some people steal or kill out of necessity. It's clear these are the type of men who enjoy taking every kind of advantage of other people.

I wrap my arms more protectively around my sister and turn her away from the leering man who can't keep his eyes off her. This man is going to be trouble, I just know it.

My sweet, giving sister has always been stubborn and head strong. I wasn't surprised when she refused to leave her house. Something about her staying behind had felt so wrong. I wish I'd paid more attention to that feeling at the time. I should have never allowed her to stay behind. Now she's been sucked into my awful world and I'm not sure I can protect her.

I realize at some point that we've been driving for so long that I have no idea where we are. I make it a point to stare out of the front windshield, and to try to read street signs and memorize landmarks. I don't know which way they're taking us and nothing looks familiar. Then again, it's been six long years since I've driven in this area, so I can't expect to remember too much.

"Do you mind if I ask where you're taking us?"

David turns around to answer me, his expression filled with dark glee. “To our newest, state-of-the-art farm. You’ll like it there. All the women do.”

My mind wanders back to the woman I met earlier in the day, Ivy. She told me about her harrowing ordeal with being taken to a breeding farm. The syndicate members would trick vulnerable pregnant women, such as those without a support system or those living rough. They’d find out about these women through social services or just by trawling the streets, and they’d tell them about their shelter for homeless pregnant women, or residential drug rehabilitation center, or adoption facility—whatever would get the women’s trust.

In reality, they were trafficked for sex at the syndicate’s brothels and their babies sold to the highest bidder. Ivy had first caught their notice when she found herself pregnant with her abusive ex’s baby and she had considered adoption. She’d changed her mind once the Savage Legion and her now husband Tank offered protection—but had remained on their radar. Luckily Tank and his club brothers managed to get her free before she was abused. Dutch had told me some of it, but I think he wanted to protect me from the worst of their depravity. Thank God for her heads-up, because now at least I know what kind of evil I’m up against.

My sister eventually wakes up and begins to panic. I put my arms around her and whisper, “We have to stay calm. Don’t let them see how much this bothers you, they enjoy scaring us and we don’t want to encourage them.”

She clamps her mouth shut and nods her head. Both of her hands come up and clasp my arm so tight it hurts. I don’t say anything because she clearly needs the physical contact to feel safe in this moment.

After several hours, we cross the state line and pull up to an old farmhouse in the middle of nowhere. There are men walking around in blue overalls, the kind that mechanics and maintenance workers wear. They’re also carrying tasers and stun guns which suggests that their presence here is more sinister. I climb out first and help Tiffany out of the van. We hang onto each other as David leads the way into the farmhouse and two of the men from the van push us along from behind. I feel like we’re animals being corralled and can’t help but wonder if we’ll make it out of this house alive.

They funnel us into a large room in the basement. It's filled with women, but nothing like the space Ivy described which sounded more like a care facility. The place smells awful, like piss and vomit. They instinctively move to the back of the room when David walks in, shoulders hunched up like they're trying to make themselves small.

I'm shocked and outraged on their behalf. This leads me to speak before I think. "What the hell have you done to them? They're all terrified of you."

David turns and backhands me across the face. I can tell the stinging slap wasn't full force, but it was unexpected and causes me to stumble sideways. Tiffany lunges at him and throws her knee right into his groin. One of the goons presses his stun gun to Tiffany's shoulder and she falls to the ground convulsing.

I scramble over to kneel beside her. "She's got a heart condition. If you give her another jolt, it might cause her to go into cardiac arrest."

David turns to the guy with the stun gun. "Disengage. It would be a waste if you accidentally killed her. What's rule number one for our new facility?"

"Don't damage the livestock, sir."

"Exactly, the clients don't like bruises."

Bile rises in my throat at his response.

I quickly help Tiff get up and out of striking distance.

David glares at me. "My old man may have thought you were hot shit. Just so we're clear, I don't. That means you get to stay alive only as long as you're useful. Once you've outlived your usefulness—unless we manage to break you—you're nothing more than a loose end that gets tied up. Got it?"

I force myself to respond politely because I don't want another round of him attacking me and my sister trying to protect me. "Yes, sir. I understand."

Of course, Tiffany has never known when to close her mouth. "The jokes on you motherfucker. I'm—"

Before she can get the words out, I clamp my hand over her mouth. “What my sister means to say is that she’s not going to be a problem moving forward. Neither of us will. We’re gonna sit right here and shut the hell up.”

David sneers at me. “You’re not half as stupid as you look. As for your mouthy sister, I look forward to breaking her spirit myself.” He brings two fingers to his eyes and then points them at Tiffany.

I don’t take my hand away from her mouth until he walks out with his thugs in tow and the door slams behind them.

“Why did you cover my mouth? I wanted to tell that asshole exactly what I thought of him,” Tiffany says testily.

I grab her shirt and pull her closer. “You will not say anything about being infertile. You heard what our crazy abductor said about us being on a breeding farm and how if we’re not useful, then we’re toast.”

She spits out, “Fuck him and the horse he rode in on. He needs to keep his damn hands to himself.”

I’m getting more exasperated with her by the minute. “He already told you that he likes feisty women. The more mouthy you are, the more he’s gonna be drawn to you. Do you have any idea what breaking you means in the context of this situation?”

My sister’s face goes pale, but she shoves me away. “If he tries to force himself on me, I’m gonna die fighting.”

I’ve had enough of this talk to last a lifetime. I push my sister to the far side of the room away from all the others and bring her hand to feel the bump on the inside of my arm.

“What in the hell is that?”

“Lower your voice. We don’t know who we can trust here. It’s a tracker. Dutch gave it to me. That means all we have to do is wait for him to track us down. If you keep drawing attention to yourself, you might not last long

enough to be rescued.”

“Alright. Fine.” Her expression darkens and she adds, “You shouldn’t have come once you realized there had been a break in.”

“They said they’d kill you if I didn’t.”

“Chase needs his mother. Nobody needs me.”

I give her a hug. “Chase and I need you. Don’t ever think otherwise.”

She nods but her expression looks pained, like she still disapproves of my choice and is embarrassed at her emotional state. “What do we do now?” Tiffany asks.

“I guess we need to gather as much information as possible in case we get rescued and the other women don’t. At least it will give the Savage Legion a starting point in recovering them.”

“I’m willing to do whatever it takes. And just so you know, if I get half a chance to take that fucking asshole out, I’m gonna jump on it.”

I frown at my sister. “You’re not a killer. You do know that, right?”

She just shrugs. “Mom and dad always told us we could be anything we wanted to be growing up.”

I roll my eyes. “You’re not funny, Tiff.”

She looks me in the eye and states flatly, “Oh, I’m not trying to be. I’m dead serious. Look at those women. They’re dirty, bruised, and terrified. That asshole is responsible for their degradation. He deserves whatever I can manage to throw at him.”

“Sweet Jesus, I never knew you had it in you to be so vengeful.”

“That asshole bruised your face and I’m gonna tag him back for that.”

“Alright, we can jump him together. Don’t try to be a hero on your own,

okay?”

“Yeah, four fists are better than two. Now let’s get to talking to these women.”

Chapter 15

Dutch

Tiffany's place has been ransacked. It doesn't seem like they were looking for anything in particular. Furniture is turned over and vases smashed, but they didn't go through closets or open drawers. It just seems like they got bored waiting for Joy to get here and wreaked a little havoc.

My club brothers are scouring the huge house and grounds. I've already had a look around while waiting for them to arrive and found nothing useful. Zen is on his laptop activating the tracker I put in Joy's arm. I have to admit when I implanted it, I'd thought having to resort to using it was a longshot. Now, here we were just days later using it to find her. After we found her purse with her cell phone inside it discarded on the driveway, I am extra pleased I persuaded her to let me implant the tracker.

I've been so fucking careful to keep her safe, and yet she somehow slipped my grasp. It isn't difficult to piece together what happened. They came looking for Joy and ended up with her sister instead. David Henderson didn't have to be a fucking genius to realize he could use Tiffany to lure Joy into his clutches. I'm so goddamn disappointed that Joy once again didn't trust me to help her in her time of need. She just ran off half-cocked into exactly the kind of danger I'm trying my damndest to protect her from. I don't know if our relationship will survive this kind of ongoing lack of trust, but I know I have to find her, save her from that depraved lunatic.

Zen shouts, "I think I have something."

We all rush to surround him at the dining room table.

Siege asks, "What do you have?"

"The signal is bouncing off several cell towers along Highway 91. Looks like they could be headed to Nevada or even Utah."

“What better place to hide a new breeding farm than Utah?” Rigs grumbles.

“We need to get after them right away, because the probability of them being hurt increases dramatically once they get to their destination.”

“Agreed,” Siege says. “The prospects just showed up with our gear. We need to get ready and head out. I doubt Joy and her sister will be able to bring down the power grid for us this time.”

Rider states excitedly, “We’ve been working on this for a month and you’re gonna love it.”

“We don’t have to get into the how of it, but Rider and I made a small electromagnetic pulse device that should be capable of knocking out the electricity of one transformer. We shimmy up the power pole, plant the device, and it should take out the power.”

Rider adds, “Let’s just hope they selected another isolated area, because taking out a transformer is gonna kill the electricity for about five or six city blocks.”

I’m uncomfortable messing with the power of private homes, but I’m even less thrilled with the idea of one of us being shot because they see us coming. “We gotta do what we’ve gotta do. Let’s gear up and hit the road. Others can join us along the way.”

Rigs speaks as we break open the crates and begin putting on our Kevlar vests under our shirts. “One of two things is going to happen when we get there. Either Henderson has tripled up on security, in which case we’ll be in for the fight of our life. Or he’s short staffed because of our efforts and is relying on the remoteness of his new location.”

“I’m betting he thinks his location is totally unknown,” Siege says. “If it weren’t for the tracking device, we’d have no idea where those two women are located. He probably thinks he’s outsmarted us.”

“He’s an arrogant shithead to be sure. I have to wonder if he’s even taken

her to a breeding farm. Maybe he hasn't had time to build another one after we burned the last one to the ground," Rigs wonders.

"David is used to thinking of himself as a criminal mastermind. He probably thinks he's always one step ahead of us, and that us finding his last facility was a one off. If that's the case, he's underestimating us again. As for whether or not he's taking her to a breeding farm, I'm gonna go with yes," Tank says sadly.

The thought of Joy being taken to such a place makes me even more eager to get on the road. Just the thought of what she might be exposed to is alarming. Women have soft hearts, and Joy in particular is a very empathetic person. Seeing women held in that kind of environment would be traumatic for her. I don't even want to think about any of those assholes laying their hands on her. Just thinking about that puts me in a murdering mood. Henderson is one sick fucker, and if I had my way, he'd be a dead one before the night was out.

Within twenty minutes we were on the road, tracking them in real time. My mind drifts back to Chase's worried face as he sat at the bar looking up at me. Mel is a good woman, she's kind, compassionate, and respectful. I know I can count on her, along with Ivy and Cleo, to look out for him and keep him occupied. The prospects take the job of protecting the clubhouse seriously, especially when the brotherhood is away. I just got my son. God knows I don't want to take a chance on losing him.

We pull up on the outskirts of a small town on the other side of the Utah border. This looks like it's shaping up to be another isolated farmhouse. This bozo, David, is getting to be a bit predictable. After losing his whole operation a couple of months back, he should have been intelligent enough to switch things up. But no, he's got himself another farm, and the drone footage shows the same blue uniformed guards milling about outside.

"I almost forgot to mention," Tank says. "When Siege and I found Ivy, one of the female guards was trying to set the building on fire. I believe they have orders to get rid of the women if there is an attack because they're witnesses who can testify to what they've seen."

I rub my temple. “Of course. That makes sense since they apparently don’t see them as people.”

Rigs says, “We need to come up with a plan. Before, the women were upstairs. It may be the same this time or they might have learned to keep them under closer scrutiny so they can’t sabotage the electrical system. In which case, they might be in the basement or one of the outbuildings.”

Ghost pops us out of nowhere, still looking mangled from being run down by an SUV when they abducted Ivy a couple of months ago. “I can cover the barn or lay down cover fire if you want to go for a full-frontal assault.”

“Bro, are you okay?”

“What? Am I oozing again?” Lifting one arm, he wipes clear liquid from one of his still healing wounds. Several of them got infected and he had to have surgery to take care of it. He’s a hot mess, but he showed up when we needed him. “There is that better?”

I give his shoulder a squeeze, the dude should have stayed at the clubhouse, but I know he wanted to be with us. “Yeah, brother, it’s all good. Thanks for showing up.”

He grins, but before he can respond, Siege begins coordinating our attack.

“Zen is going to use one of our aerial drones to get the EMP device close to the transformer. Once it blows, we need to move forward as quickly as possible.”

We’re in a situation where our bikes have to be far enough away from the EMP detonation to be safe from the effect, so that means we’re on foot for several hundred yards. It would make us sitting ducks if there were lights. Fortunately, there aren’t.

We edge forward and wait anxiously for the loud pop alerting us that the transformer has blown. When it comes, it’s like a clap of thunder that echoes through the night.

There are close to thirty of us, and it's utter pandemonium on the ground as the guards try to pick us off before we reach the house. Some of them are a pretty good shot but, we outnumber them two to one. Plus, our Kevlar gives us a decided advantage. We swarm them, fast and brutal from a lifetime of experience fighting. Ghost and several brothers head to an old, dilapidated barn and the rest of us rush into the house. Rather than a two story like their last property, this one is a sprawling one-story ranch.

My gut tells me the most secure area is the basement, so I begin searching for stairs. I find them in the kitchen. It takes four kicks to get through the door. I barrel into a guard, knocking him to the floor, and then put boot to face until he's not moving. Siege and Rigs take on the remaining two guards. I suddenly realize that there aren't any female guards. All the guards I've seen so far are male, which is good for my conscience because I don't have any problems offing them.

The basement is partitioned off, leaving an area for the guards in front and what appears to be one large open room in the back. Rigs and I take turns ramming the door with our shoulders until it finally gives. The room is packed with dirty, scared women who don't know what to make of the gunshots outside or us barreling through the door.

Among the sea of faces is my Joy. She runs straight into my arms.

I hug her tight. "Thank fucking God you're still alive."

"I'm okay, and so damn glad you made me get the tracking chip."

"I am too," I say against her hair.

"I knew you would come," she whispers before pulling back to look up at me.

"Wouldn't miss this night for the fucking world. Now, who do I need to kill?"

Her eyes get big as if she just realized something important. She shoves me aside and points to the door frantically. "They took Tiffany."

I grab her arm and turn her back around to look at me. “Who took her? Where did they take her?”

“David Henderson came and had his goons drag her out about twenty minutes ago.” She clutches my shirt. “I don’t know where they took her, but we’ve got to find her.”

My soon-to-be wife is right to be fucking terrified. That asshole could be doing anything to her even as we speak. “Alright, stay behind me. I don’t want you separated from me. My club brothers have cleared out most of the guards.”

“We need to search every room,” Joy says.

I press the button for the mic on my earpiece. “We’re missing my old lady’s sister. Clear every single room in the house.”

Ghost’s voice comes over the earpiece. “I don’t know what her sister looks like, but three guys just busted out of the barn in an SUV. There was brunette fighting like hell to get out of the vehicle. She was wearing jeans and a mint green sweater.”

I turn to Joy, “Your sister wearing jeans and a green sweater?”

“That’s her,” Joy shouts in my ear.

“Affirmative, that’s Joy’s sister,” I say.

“I’m on it. Rider and Tank followed them. I’ll hit the road as well. I’ve got my locator turned on, so you can follow,” Ghost says.

Joy hits my arm repeatedly. “Let’s go. I don’t want them to get too far away.”

We make our way past my club brothers and around a dozen guards in various states of being subdued. I move as fast as I can toward my bike, and once we get there, I pull out the extra helmet I always carry. Joy grabs it and begins putting it on to free up my hands so I can put mine on. I check my cell phone and we’re on the highway within a matter of minutes.

Truth be told, I'm feeling some kind of way about taking Joy with me. I know she'd throw a fit if I left her behind, and I don't want her on that farm until I'm a hundred percent certain all the guards are dealt with. I don't think I've ever been more nervous in my entire life. I'm picking the best of two seriously shitty choices, praying she doesn't catch a bullet along the way. I can't allow anything to happen to the woman I love because I don't know what I would do without her or how my small son could possibly cope with losing his mother.

We've been on the road for a few hours, Ghost checks in with us several times saying they're following Henderson's vehicle at a discrete distance so they don't get spooked and kill her—or dump her doing seventy down the interstate. We thought he'd head further into Utah, but instead he heads back toward the California state line. My brothers are smart men, Henderson is an idiot if he thinks he can take a woman under the protection of our club without repercussions.

Eventually, we catch up with them in a classy suburb outside Las Salinas. I'm shocked that he took her back to his hometown. I have a bad feeling the crazy fucker is planning to try to wife her up or something. Joy told me when we stopped for gas that she could tell Henderson had a thing for her sister.

Wasting no time, we converge on his location. Although we saw them go into the house, it appears to be empty when we pick the locks and slip in. We clear every single room downstairs and my club brothers clear the upstairs rooms, including bathrooms and closets. That only leaves one option, the garage. From the outside it looked like a triple. Rider and Smoke take the lead.

We make our way to the kitchen, but right before we get there, I notice steps leading down. I motion to my club brothers and shove Joy behind me. Truth be told, under normal circumstances I'd be happier if she stayed outside—but given the sneakiness of these syndicate fuckers I'm not taking any chances, so I've tasked Ghost with being her protector. That gives the brother something to do but keeps him out of the foray. I know he wants to be

in there front and center, but he's still not up to fighting speed. As we stand there quietly preparing to descend the steps, we can hear voices whispering. I can't make out what they're saying, but Rider takes a step forward and the others follow him down the narrow staircase. We all have our guns drawn, but will be extremely reluctant to shoot for fear of hitting Tiffany. Everything about this situation is setting off alarm bells in my mind.

We descend into the basement. There are five people standing in the back of the room. Henderson is looking very pleased with himself. Standing beside him is a woman old enough to be his mother. She's wearing a fancy pant suit and pearls. Her hair is pulled back in a severe bun at the nape of her neck. The look of dark glee on her face gives me pause. I also see Tiffany with two of Henderson's thugs on either side holding her arms. There is a thick sheet of plexiglass shielding them. It's likely ballistic. No wonder they're so fucking smug.

Tiffany yells, "It's a trap. Run. Run now."

I try to turn, intending to get Joy out of there, but she won't go. Instead, she's pulling away from me, trying to run to her sister. My three club brothers have no intention of going anywhere.

Within a few seconds, another thick piece of plexiglass drops down from the ceiling, trapping us. I reach out and try to push it, but it won't budge. Each piece is hinged like a garage door and it snapped firmly into place when it hits the floor leaving us trapped like rats.

I turn to face off with Henderson, but Joy's beat me to it. "Look, you don't need my sister. Take me instead."

"I told you, you're damaged goods. Besides, why negotiate when I can have you both?" he replies smugly.

"Neither of us have done anything to you. I didn't understand why your father kept looking for me or why you give a shit about me."

He takes a step closer to the clear partition. "I never wanted you, Ms. Covington. It was my mother who had an axe to grind with you."

David's mother rolls her eyes. "You're so astonishingly ignorant. I can't believe my husband wasted a small fortune hunting you down."

"Look," Joy pleads, "if you think I flirted with him or anything like that, I can promise you I didn't. I didn't want anything to do with him."

"I'm well aware. That's why you ran. The thing is, I didn't want you anywhere near him. Every time the men he hired got close, I had one of my employees drop you a clue."

Joy's mouth falls open. "That was you?"

She sighs as though talking to Joy is beneath her. "Of course, well not me per se, but one of my men."

"I don't understand."

"Clearly, you didn't graduate at the top of your class. Think about it for a minute. Why would my husband pay people to hunt you down, and then tip you off that they'd found you. Didn't you find that strange?"

"I thought it was all part of some plan to terrify me into doing what he wanted."

The woman's upper lip curls back in disgust. "I think you're giving my husband too much credit. He never had the patience for a bunch of mind games. He wanted to locate you so he could leverage you into having his child. Nothing more nefarious than that."

"It sounds pretty damn nefarious to me, and your sons are clearly following in their father's footsteps."

"You mean by joining the syndicate? My sons didn't join. They were born into it. You might say it's our family business."

I reach over Joy's shoulder and punch the glass right in front of the old lady, making her jump. "What I want to know is why the hell are you so fucking chatty all the sudden, your husband is dead, what do you want with her now?"

The old woman glares at me. “My husband squandered our family fortune looking for Ms. Covington, hoping to get the daughter I never gave him. However, I wasn’t going to let him catch up with her, I didn’t want the man I loved getting his hands on that tramp, so I warned her away. Better to lose the money, than my husband. He spent one point three million dollars of my inheritance on something I consider frivolous, and now I want my money back.”

Joy just shakes her head. “If you think I’ve got one point three million dollars in my bank account, you had better thank again.”

“No. Of course you don’t. But your new fiancé does, or pretty close to it if he sold off all his property.”

“How the hell do you know about the land I bought twenty fucking years ago?”

“We’re syndicate. We know everything, Mr. Scott.”

I snort a laugh. “If that were true, we wouldn’t have taken out two of your breeding farms.”

“It doesn’t matter. You fell right into our carefully laid trap tonight.”

“It may look that way, but I promise you that before the sun rises, you’re going to watch your son die and then have the unique pleasure of running for your life, just like my Joy was forced to do for fuckin’ years.”

The woman takes a step closer to the glass and stares up at me. “No matter how bad you think you are, my brother will rip you apart if you dare to put your hands on my son.”

I’m parsing over what she said about this being a family business, and suddenly it all falls into place as I realize who this evil old woman’s brother is—he’s the head of the fucking syndicate. “He can bring it on. I’ve been itching to get my hands on Pope for a while now.”

Both David and his mother gasp. Henderson steps closer to his mother and

wraps one arm around her. “It doesn’t matter how he found out Pope’s name. It won’t help him survive the coming war.”

Glancing from his mother up to me, David delivers an ultimatum. “I’m going to let you out so you can arrange the money transfer my mother requested. If you don’t come through with the money or contact the authorities, everyone you leave behind dies. If you bring a bunch of your club brothers to swarm the place, we’ll start by killing her sister and then start taking your fiancée apart a piece at a time.”

“I thought you wanted Tiffany?” I ask.

“Well, I have to admit I did think she might be a pleasant amusement. But business is business, I can find another woman.”

“Your old man wasn’t all that bright, and I can see the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree. If you put so much as a scratch on either of the women under our protection, you’ll both die screaming.”

David snarls, “Their safety is in your hands, Mr. Scott. Get the money if you want them to walk out of here alive. You’ve got until noon tomorrow before we start maiming them.”

“I’ll get you your damn money. I can always make more money. I can’t make another fiancée.”

“Not to mention your club brothers. I’ll enjoy filling them with holes, especially the one who testified against my brother.” He shoots Ghost a quick smirk. “Thanks for bringing him along tonight.”

I curse under my breath when he reaches over and pushes a button that causes the back plexiglass wall to lift up slightly. I give Joy a hard kiss and scramble thought the opening and up the steps. Even as I jump onto my bike the wheels in my head are turning, trying to figure out a way out of this situation that guarantees everyone makes it out alive.

Chapter 16

Joy

A quick glance at my watch tells me it's three in the morning. That means Dutch has nine hours to come up with over a million dollars. I seriously don't think he has that kind of money. I know they mentioned property, but even I know he can't sell something like that and have money in hand within nine hours. It feels like they're just baiting him or playing for time until this Pope person can get here and take charge. I trust that Dutch will do everything in his power to try to save me, my sister and his club brothers. I just don't think it's humanly possible.

I turn to the older woman behind the glass. "Can my sister come in and wait with me?"

Instead of answering, she walks away and her son messes with something that looks similar to a thermostat on the wall. Then he smirks one final time and says, "Night, night. Time to go to sleep."

A white smoke begins pouring out of the vents on either side of the room. Rider, Tank, and Ghost rush forward and pick me up. I feel them lifting me into the air and they press me face first along the crack against the ceiling.

"What are you doing?" None of this makes any sense to me.

"He's either knocking us out so he can restrain us or using a poisonous gas to kill us. Chances are whatever gas they're using is heavier than air. That means it will sink to the ground. The higher up in the room you are, the longer you'll live."

"I don't want to die like this."

The horribly scarred one, Ghost, says, "They probably won't kill you until they leverage Dutch into paying the money they want."

I can hear my sister losing her mind across the room. "Stop! What the hell

are you doing? Her fiancé is not going to give you a million dollars for corpse.”

David backhands her. “You are going to learn to close that pretty mouth of yours.”

I feel so helpless, I can't comfort my sister. I can't do anything about the gas flooding into the chamber. I can't help Dutch pay the money they want because I'm flat ass busted. It seems that no matter what I do, my life is an epic fail.

Then I remember my son. Chase is something special and I have got to survive for him if for no other reason. Tears well up in my eyes because even though the brothers are doing everything humanly possible to protect me, it's impossible. Slowly, their hands go lax, and my world goes dark as I crash to the ground.

When I wake up, my head is pounding, and my throat is burning. I immediately begin coughing and throw up on the floor. That's when I realize I'm no longer in the basement of the Henderson home. I rub my stinging eyes and it takes a moment for everything to come into focus.

We're in some kind of supply cave and I can see a multitude of blue-uniformed thugs rummaging through crates of weapons.

I push up to my knees and look around for Tiffany. I find her still unconscious on the floor near Ghost and Rider. Tank is next to me and helps me to my feet. That's when the chain on my ankle jingles against the stone floor. “What the actual fuck?” I croak out.

“It's an ankle shackle. No big deal. They just want to limit our movements so we can't get to those weapons or cause any trouble.”

We move back near the others. “How did we get here?”

“They gassed us, chained us, and moved us, probably in a panel van or

delivery truck.”

I roll Tiffany over and put two fingers to her throat. Her pulse is steady, so I assume she’ll wake up soon, my poor sister has been through so much because of me. “We need to get the hell outta here,” I whisper.

“No,” Rider whispers. “I think there’s something more going on here.”

I gape at him. “You think?” With a sweeping wave of my arm, I gesture toward the crates of guns. “I thought these people were human traffickers.”

“One of the two men who took Tiffany earlier whispered for us to keep our heads down when the shooting starts.” Rider’s voice is quiet so only Tank, Ghost and I can hear.

“You think this might be some kind of law enforcement sting operation and we bungled our way into it?” Tank asks.

Rider nods, leaning forward. “I think maybe they intended to bust them at the farm, but we got there first. The agent is warning us not to fuck up their plans again.”

We go quiet and I stroke my sister’s face in an effort to wake her up. I glance down at my watch to find that it’s gone. My hand automatically moves up to my chest. “They took my locket.” My voice breaks as I speak.

“They took everything. Our phones, wallets, watches, pocketknives, and even the Kevlar vests we were wearing under our shirts.”

“Fucking thieves do that,” Ghost mumbles. I watch as he wipes at his face. One of his still healing wounds is leaking a bit of clear fluid. Clearly this man should not be out and about trying to protect me and my sister tonight.

“I forgot to tell you guys that David told me that his father originally wanted me because I was dating Dutch. He wanted to use me to leverage Dutch into being his spy inside the Savage Legion. Then he became obsessed with me, and the plan changed. The syndicate has had their eye on your club a lot longer than you realize.”

A short silence spins out before Tank snorts a laugh. “They don’t fucking know Dutch very well if they think he’d be easy to turn.”

A slight smile touches my lips. “He loves the club and would never allow himself to be used that way.”

“Dam straight,” Rider adds.

My sister groans. “If I get my hands on that bastard, I’m going to brain him.”

I help her sit up. “You might feel nauseous. Throwing up helped me.”

“He didn’t expose me to whatever he used on the rest of you. He hit me on the head. The asshole has hit me three or four times already. If I end up with a concussion or brain damage, he’s paying my fucking medical bills.”

“He’s not gonna live along enough for anything like that. If Dutch has his way, he’ll be dead by sunup,” Tank says.

I remember my sweet fiancé saying something like that.

Something is niggling at the back of my mind. “If we interrupted some kind of sting operation back at the farm, does that mean the brothers who showed up there are going to get arrested for shooting up the place?”

Tank answers me slowly, as though he’s choosing his words carefully. “I’m gonna say no. Henderson abducted you and your sister from your home. We arrived in time to follow them to the farm. When we attempted to dialogue with them about releasing you, they began shooting at us. We responded in self-defense, killing only when necessary to save our own lives or the lives of innocent bystanders.”

Tiffany opens her mouth to object, but I interject. “Yes. That’s my recollection as well. I didn’t see any brothers shooting first. It was all return fire only in self-defense.”

Tiffany shrugs, then winces with the movement. “Fine, if that’s the story we’re going with, I’m there for it. Anything else I should be aware of?”

I speak up. “Just remember all the things David said about what he planned to do to you and all the things the women told us happened to them. Whoever is running this sting operation will ask questions and we need to give the most accurate information possible.”

My sister nods.

Suddenly, one of the men across the room jerks his chin at Rider. “Okay shit, is going down now.”

The brothers quickly get to their feet and then help Tiffany and me up. They turn us around and shove us against the wall face first, protecting us with their bodies.

Tank mutters, “If one of us goes down, use our bodies as a shield.”

My sister responds in a shocked voice, “Fuck that. We’ll try to stem the blood loss.”

I agree with her. “I am not going to tell your lovely wife that I let you bleed out and used your body as a human shield, so fuck off with that kind of talk.”

Before we can argue about it further, gunfire sounds off in the distance. Then things get chaotic as the men inside the cave run around grabbing weapons and cursing. One of them yells, “It’s probably those fucking bikers again.”

David and his mother are nowhere to be found, but that doesn’t mean they aren’t nearby. I can’t help but hope he gets arrested rather than killed. Killing is too good for him. I’d rather see him suffer in prison for the rest of his life.

Most of the men run outside, but not the two that were with David at his house. They hang back and keep handing out weapons and sending the men outside to hold off the intruders. Finally, it’s just us and them in the cave.

Rider asks, “Who are you with? What agency?”

He responds, “FBI’s Federal Human Trafficking Task Force.”

“So you’re just giving these assholes guns to shoot your fellow officers with?”

He tosses Tank the key to our shackles. “We replaced the bullets with blanks. It’s not like we jump into action with no plan in place.”

“Sorry if we fucked up your plan at the farmhouse,” Rider says.

“Yeah, that was a clusterfuck. I don’t know how that’s going to play out for you in court.”

“Self-defense,” Rider responds flatly.

“Best of luck with that. The shooting has ended. We’d best get out there before they come in with guns drawn looking for you.”

They put handcuffs on each of us and march us out of the cave and down an embankment. Tiffany and I hold onto each other so we don’t fall. The brothers huddle around us protectively. I wonder why they cuffed us since we’re the victims, but they say it’s standard procedure. One agent leads the way and the other follows behind. Both have their guns drawn.

The sight I see at the bottom makes my heart sing with happiness. There are multiple state and local police cars, plus vehicles from the FBI. Most of the goons from the cave are lined up beside David and his mother. They’re all lying face down on the ground in a row with their hands cuffed behind their backs.

I’m smart enough to know there is a good chance we’re going to end up right beside them, but I don’t even care. As long as they end up in jail, I’ll happily bide my time until they can figure out we’re the victims rather than the perpetrators.

We pass pretty close to David, and before I can stop her, Tiffany jerks away from me and kicks him right in the face. He’s kind of a sitting duck with his hands cuffed behind his back and she takes full advantage of it.

Before I realize what's happening she's on top of him in an instant, smashing him repeatedly in the face with her cuffs.

It takes the guards a second to react because it happened so fast. One of the deputies rushes over because she doesn't quit. I stick out my leg and trip him as he runs past me. David deserves every single thing my sister is dishing out to him right now.

One of the agents who brought us out of the cave stalks over and pulls my sister off the asshole who abducted us. "I know you're pissed, but this is not the way to get justice."

Tiffany kicks at David one more time, totally missing him. "Don't you ever put your hands on me again, you degenerate asshole."

The agents continue walking us down the hill. That's when I see Dutch standing with Siege, Rigs, Smoke, and a couple of law enforcement officers from Las Salinas PD.

Dutch comes to me and growls, "Take the fucking cuffs off my fiancé right goddamn now."

Smoke adds, "I'm acting legal representation for all five of them. I can understand you wanting to cuff the men until you can take a statement, but there is no justification for cuffing the victims."

The one who pulled Tiffany off David pulls his thumb back over his shoulder. "If you'd seen Ms. Covington attacking one of our perps a minute ago, you might have second thoughts about that."

"That asshole backhanded her so many times we think she might have a concussion. She clearly wasn't thinking straight," I say, defending my sister.

"Sounds like they both might need medical attention," Smoke says firmly.

"Yeah, that's fine. But they need an officer covering them until we can get detailed statements about what happened."

One of the Las Salinas officers steps forward. "Since they aren't under

arrest, you can remove the cuffs and I'll take personal responsibility for the women."

The agent unlocks our cuffs. "What about the men? You taking them as well?"

"Not a chance. Talk to my supervisor about that."

I speak up on behalf of Tank, Rider, and Ghost. "They knocked us all out with some kind of gas. It made me sick and I threw up. We all need to be seen by a doctor."

When he looks skeptical, I point to Ghost. "This one needs urgent medical treatment, I don't think you want someone with a bacterial infection leaking body fluids all over you and your crime scene. Plus, I might not be a lawyer, but as a paralegal advisor I can tell you that the death of an innocent man in custody from sepsis won't look good in court."

The agent shoots Ghost a horrified look and then gets cooperative fast. "How about you transport them all to the local hospital and I'll send an agent to take the women's statements and stay with the men until we decide if charges will be filed?"

The Las Salinas officer doesn't seem too happy with that request, but agrees. "Fine, but don't leave me hanging. We don't have overtime authorized to babysit your suspects."

Dutch tucks me against his side and walks off with me. "How are you holding up, sunshine? That asshole didn't hit you too, did he?"

"No. My throat burns, though."

"I'll get you to the hospital and we'll let them have a look at you."

I glance over my shoulder to see my sister being assisted by several brothers. She's still spitting mad and complaining loudly about David fucking Henderson and how she hopes he rots in hell. Truth be told, so do I.

Chapter 17

Joy

Getting checked out takes a few hours, but I'm relieved that neither my sister nor I are seriously injured. The gas used on me didn't leave a lasting impact, and outside of a slight concussion and some bruising, Tiffany is fine. I ride home from the hospital on the back of Dutch's bike. Absolutely nothing feels better than hanging onto the man I love while his tires eat up the road.

When we get home, Mel is there with Chase. I bend down and he comes running right into my arms.

"I missed you," he says. "Did you have fun?"

I pull back, shocked that he asked that. "What?"

"Dad said you and Auntie Tiffany got lost and ended up at a petting zoo when you were helping her find a new home for the spider."

I press my lips together to keep from laughing. "Yeah, we had a good time. Except the getting lost part. That wasn't much fun."

"I'm glad Dad finded you."

Dutch's hand lands on my shoulder. "Mommy's been up all night. She's going to need to sleep for a few hours."

"Okay," our son responds happily. "We'll make you some bacon when you wake up."

I smile at Mel as I stand up straight. "Thanks for looking out for our son. I appreciate it more than you know."

Her response is accompanied by a huge smile. "No need to thank me. It's been a long time since I had a day off. Spending time with Chase has been

really nice.”

Dutch’s hand lands in the small of my back and he begins gently guiding me upstairs. First, we get into the shower and he soaps my tired muscles up as I talk to him about what David said about wanting to use me to turn him into the syndicate’s inside man for the Savage Legion. He’s about as shocked as the others were when I told them.

“I’m really sorry that dating me got you pulled into danger from the syndicate. To be honest, we were oblivious about them until Siege’s sister died and we discovered kids were missing while he was struggling to get custody of his sister’s kids.”

“It’s weird how they identified your club as a potential threat before you knew they existed.”

“I’m guessing there aren’t many people in our area who could pose a threat to the syndicate the way our club does. Or it may be that Siege’s sister drew their notice way back in the day when her boyfriend was associating with a guy who ran drugs for the syndicate. If they looked into her, they would have discovered her brother was with the Savage Legion.”

“Do you know how the FBI got involved?”

“A long time before our club realized children were going missing, there was a CPS worker who tried to sound the alarm. He couldn’t get his chain of command, the police, or anyone to listen. When he realized a kid on his caseload was being abused by a member of the syndicate, he took the kid and another at risk youth and her mother. He talked them into running so he could keep the three of them safe. He’s been trying to alert the authorities fairly consistently for a few years. My best guess is that he finally succeeded.”

“And not a moment too soon. I don’t know if we would have made it out of that cave alive if the feds hadn’t shown up when they did. There were so many weapons being stored there. Enough to hold off you and your club brothers for days.”

He runs his soapy fingers in little circles on my back as he launches into

an. “I immediately contacted Smoke to help me secure a signature loan against my property, and he alerted me that the feds were involved. They’d contacted the Las Salinas PD looking to partner up. Our contact there alerted Siege, who, in turn, gave them your tracking information. It was consistent with where his undercover agents were. Our contact said the FBI had suspected it was a weapons storage depot. The second I got off the phone with Smoke, I made a beeline for Siege, and we headed to the site.”

“What about the women at the breeding farm. Did they all make it out alive?” I asked.

He rinsed me off, then turned off the shower and wrapped a towel around me. “Yeah. Siege said the FBI showed up just as they were wrapping things up. They’ve still got a whole team of agents there taking statements and figuring out what to do with all the women.”

“I’m surprised none of the brothers got arrested over what went down at the farm.”

“Law enforcement doesn’t like vigilante justice, to be sure. However, the women there told them that they were in active danger and we saved their lives, so the feds decided to hold off on charging us until the district attorney could review the case more thoroughly. I suspect the same will happen for Rider, Tank, and Ghost.”

“I hope so,” I say with a yawn. “Thank God it’s finally over, because I’m absolutely exhausted.”

“I can see that you are, sunshine. We’re going to bed right now. After we catch up on our sleep, we’re going to spend some quality time with Chase. How does that sound?”

I go to grasp my locket and nothing is there. A sinking feeling settles in my stomach. “That sounds wonderful, but I need to tell you something, babe.”

Gazing down into my eyes, he asks, “What’s up, sweetness?”

“After they gassed us, we woke up and everything was taken from us,

including my necklace.”

“I’ll have Smoke petition the court to return it to you once the case has been tried. Until then, it’s considered evidence I’m afraid.”

“It’s fine,” I respond despondently. “I hate not having it, but if that’s one of the things necessary to put these creeps behind bars, I’ll accept it.”

He dries my body off before picking me up and putting me between the sheets. “Don’t worry, sunshine. I’ll buy you another locket. A bigger and better one.”

I pull him down for a kiss. “I don’t need bigger and better. I like what I have.”

“Is that right? Well then, you better give me a goodnight kiss so we can tumble off to sleep happy and content. I’m warning you ahead of time if your hands wander, you’re not gonna get to sleep anytime soon.” The teasing quality of his voice and his flaccid cock tell me he’s just joking.

I give his shoulder a chaste kiss. “I’m always up for a kiss and a cuddle from my favorite guy.”

“I’ll mention that to Chase when I get a minute. In the meantime, maybe you could give your second favorite guy a kiss.”

Too tired to play anymore games with my handsome biker, I allow him to cover my mouth with his and get lost in the sensual feel of his lips against mine. One of his hands caresses the side of my face and I melt into his warm embrace. There’s nothing in the world I love better than being in Dutch’s arms. This is where I’m meant to be, in his warm, loving embrace.

I slide my hands around his body and rake my nails up and down his back. The more we kiss, the more aroused I become. In this moment, there are no syndicate thugs, assholes who want to use me to get to the Savage Legion, or old women who hate me because their husbands wanted me. Right now, there’s just me and the man I love, lying warm and naked in each other’s arms.

I feel his cock get hard against my hip and he murmurs, “I thought you wanted to sleep, sweetness.”

“Aren’t we still making up for lost time?”

He pulls back and presses his forehead against mine. “You’ve been through a lot. You should probably rest.”

“Something about almost dying makes me want to live.”

Understanding crosses his face. “I’d be up for some lovemaking if you agree to let me do all the work.”

I nod. “Anything you say. I just want to be with you.”

“You sure about that?” Dutch asks worriedly.

“Of course. I’ll always want you.”

“Yeah, well, I have a pretty high sex drive, so if it gets to be too much, just throw the brakes on it. I’ll always respect your no.”

“You won’t need to because all you’re ever gonna get from me is yeses.”

I accentuate my declaration by pinching his nipple gently. Doing that makes his cock jerk, so I do it again. He stares down at me and blinks slowly with his mouth hanging open. When he lifts his upper lip in a sexy snarl and slowly rubs his thick cock along the soft skin of my hip, I know he likes it. I lean forward and run my tongue around the dark disk and tease it gently with my teeth.

One of his hands comes up to tangle in my hair and he pulls me gently back. When my eyes rise to look at his face, there is a thick overlay of lust covering his features. “You’re far too good at that, sunshine. You agreed to let me do all the work, remember?”

“But I want to suck your cock. Badly.”

“You used to be pretty good at sucking my cock.”

“Remember how you used to call it a reward? Well, I think I deserve a reward. Don’t you?”

His mouth is open and his chest is heaving like he’s run a mile. This is what an excited Dutch looks like. I remember he much he loves it when I suck his cock and slowly slide down his body. He leans back on his hands, showing off his long, tattooed body and washboard abs. I get onto my hands and knees, enjoying the view.

“May I suck your cock, sir?” I’m starting up one of the games we used to play when we dated six years ago. The one we both liked best.

“I don’t know. You look like a nice lady, not the kind to suck biker cock.”

“Oh, I’ve never sucked anyone’s cock before. I just wanted a little taste of yours because it’s long, thick, and tattooed.”

He gestures to his cock with one hand. “I don’t know. I have this rule that only women named Joy can suck my cock. See, it’s tattooed right there.”

I move closer and take him in hand. Along with the familiar swirling tribal design, I see my name has been tattooed along the shaft of his cock. I can’t believe I didn’t notice it until now, but I guess this is the first time since I returned that we’ve lazily explored each other’s bodies.

When my eyes lift to his, he’s staring at me intently. “You like?”

“I love it. When did you have that done?”

“The second anniversary of you leaving me. I’d looked for you off and on for two years and got this the day I gave up looking. I thought you must have wanted nothing to do with me to have run so far and hard. Still, I couldn’t quite let go, so I got this to remember you by. No matter what happened, my cock would only be yours.”

Hearing his words makes me emotional. Instead of sucking him off, I climb up his body and throw my arms around his neck. I cup his face with one hand, loving every single thing about this man. “I don’t deserve you. In

fact, the world doesn't deserve to have someone so good and pure walking the earth. But I'm going to spend the night proving to you just how grateful I am to have you in my life."

His hand comes up to tangle in my hair and he pulls me down until we're face-to-face. "You realize you're the only woman who's ever seen me as special, right?"

"If that's the case, it just goes to show that all the women you've bumped into were fools. How lucky for me, though."

"Can we start with a kiss? I always feel the most connected when your lips are on mine. Kissing is a kind of intimacy I crave with you."

I nod. "It's the same with me. I never thought kisses were that big of a deal until I met you."

When our lips meet, it always gives me butterflies. It's the way Dutch kisses. He slides one hand into my hair and there's always a brief moment where he pauses, closes his eyes, and hesitates just long enough that we're breathing the same air. The anticipation always doubles and then triples in that moment. Then his lips ghost across mine, soft and gentle like I'm fragile and he has to be careful not to break me. Inside my head, I'm chanting *more, more, more*. When he finally opens his mouth against mine and swipes his tongue over my bottom lip in an unspoken request for entrance, I respond in kind. That's when the kiss really heats up. I melt into his arms as he plunders my mouth, taking all he wants from me. I'm eager to give him everything.

I slide my hands through his hair and feel him smile against my lips when I give a gentle tug. This man of mine likes a little hair pulling. It's one of the things I remember from before. I've retained a lot of memories from our time together all those years ago. Each memory is like a bright shiny jewel tucked away in the dark recesses of my mind. I'm honored to be making more treasured memories with this man. I'll never take him for granted if I live to be hundred.

I pull back and move down his body, intent on giving him all the pleasure he deserves. Tonight is my turn to give and I intend to make it a night to

remember. I kiss my way down his chest and nibble at his skin. When I stick my tongue in his navel and swirl it around, he laughs. Pleasing him pleases me. By the time I make it back down to his cock, it's hard as a rock and dripping with precome. I love it when he's aroused and messy for me.

Using my hands, I slick it down his thick cock. I run one finger over my name, I wonder how many other women have seen it in the years we were apart, and it makes me irrationally angry—even though I have no right to be, because I left him.

I swirl my tongue around his shaft and glance up to find him staring down at me with eager anticipation. “You need to write *property of* at the base.”

“I like the idea of you claiming me.”

“Too bad they don't make property cuts for men.”

My big biker finds that amusing. I can tell by the lopsided smile that jumps onto his face. Before he can come back with a clever reply, I run my tongue over the head of his cock, paying special attention to the spot right under the tip. He's sensitive there. When I suck at the spot he goes ramrod straight.

He tastes amazing, and knowing how much pleasure he takes in my mouth boosts my confidence. I suck his cock into my mouth as far as possible and move my head up and down. His hand is still fisted in my hair, and he intentionally moves my head at a slow pace while I hollow out my cheeks and suck his gorgeous rod. He begins rocking his hips ever so slightly, pressing the underside of his cock firmly down on my tongue. I allow him to control the pace because I know he gets off on the control. Dutch has never gagged me on his cock, not once, so I totally trust him. This time is no different. I suck as he slides in and out of my mouth, just enjoying the feeling of him. I grip his cock with my hands and give him long, firm strokes that coincide perfectly with my mouth.

When I know he's really close, I drop one hand down to palm his balls. I like the weight of them in my hands. As I caress them, I can feel them draw up slightly against his body. He starts cursing under his breath and talking about coming in my mouth. I take him deeper and run my thumb between his

ball sack. That does it for him. He spurts in my mouth as I keep sucking it all down. Within moments he pulls me off his cock and gazes down into my face. I love how he looks right after he comes, all awe struck and aroused. He leans down and captures my lips in a smoking hot kiss. Our tongues tangle and the thought of him tasting himself on my tongue spikes my arousal.

The next thing I know, he switches our position, putting me on my hands and knees. I look over my shoulder at him, thrilled at the thought of a good hard fuck from behind.

“No, sunshine. Put your chest and shoulders down on the bed.”

I eagerly do as I’m told and am surprised when he drags me to the edge of the bed and kneels on the floor. Excitement strums through my gut as I realize what he’s about to do.

“I like how wet you are for me. Does sucking my cock arouse you?” His deep, rough voice is teasing.

I glance back at him. “You know that it does. I love having my mouth on you.”

“You’re a good woman. Now, enjoy your treat.” The next thing I know, his devilish tongue is sweeping through my drenched folds. Every time it hits my clit, I moan with pleasure. He concentrates his attention there and slides one long finger into my core. This man can find my g-spot quicker than I blink. Suddenly, he taps it while licking and sucking my clit. He’s not playing tonight. It takes me less than five minutes to come screaming his name.

When he lowers my body back down to the bed and moves forward, I know what’s coming next. And I can’t wait. The thick head of his cock bumps against my opening and I spread my legs to give him room to take me. He slides home in one firm thrust. I groan at how full I am of him.

“You feel amazing,” I murmur.

“You too, sunshine. You too.” He pulls out and pushes back in rough and firm. It sends shockwaves of pure pleasure radiating through my body. He

massages my breasts before moving to tap against my wet clit.

“Oh God, I’m not gonna last, babe.”

“You don’t have to last. Come around my cock. I want to feel you squeezing me.”

With that command, the tapping finger on my clit begins rubbing. It’s too much. My body clamps down around his in the strongest orgasm of my entire life. He slams into me one more time and I can feel him coming inside me. When he’s finished, he pulls me into his lap. My back is to his chest and both his arms come up to wrap around me.

I allow my head to drop back against his shoulder. “That was amazing.”

He kisses the side of my neck and responds, “Yeah, it was the best. I have so many things I want to try out with you.”

I can still feel his cock throbbing inside my body like it has a heartbeat of its own. I bring my hands up and over my head to caress his face. “You’re amazing both in and out of bed. I’m up for whatever you want whenever you want.”

“How about a big blow out wedding? Would you be up for that?”

“You’re offering way more than I need. I’d be happy with a small wedding or even getting married at the courthouse.”

“I want something special for you, Joy. You’ve been through a lot and deserve so much better than life has handed you over the last six years. Let me make our wedding special. It will be my gift to you, an expression of my love.”

I relax back against his chest. “Alright, if you’re sure that’s what you want. The thought of having a beautiful gown and a bunch of guests is kind of nice. I never thought I’d have something like that.”

“I plan to give you everything, a classy wedding, a nice home, and my support, no matter what you want to do with your life.”

“You know all those other women who passed you up were batshit crazy, right?”

He huffs out an exasperated breath. “I didn’t want any of them. I only ever wanted you, my Joy.”

“Well, you got me, babe. And I’ll do whatever it takes to make you happy.”

He hugs me tighter. “You don’t have to do anything but be yourself. I like you just the way you are.”

“I never dared to dream of a real happily ever after because of all the running. Being with you feels like finally getting everything I ever wanted all wrapped up in one sexy, tattooed package.”

“May you always think so, sunshine,” he whispers in my ear.

I don’t know how long we sit there with me impaled on his cock, but eventually we crawl into bed. Just having him near makes me feel like I’m finally home.

Epilogue

Joy

3 Months Later

When a horn honks loud and long, I run to the window to look out onto the back lawn. There are white canopies covering banquet tables set with sparkling china and crystal. When the horn sounds again, I realize it's from the bakery van, the one bringing our wedding cake. Apparently, one of the catering vans is blocking the entrance. It only takes a moment for a couple of the prospects to come bounding out of the clubhouse to resolve the issue.

I force myself to stop spying on our wedding team. I asked for a half an hour before the wedding begins to meditate. Since this is probably the only alone time I'm going to get today, I run my hands down the front of my white silk slip and close my eyes. I begin running through all the last-minute preparations to see if we've missed anything. After considering all of the possible wedding venues we decided on holding it at the Savage Legion clubhouse. I knew how much it meant to Dutch, and his club brothers were my extended family now. There is honestly no place on earth I'd rather say 'I do' to my man, than here.

When I'm certain everything has been taken care of, I open my eyes to the sight of my wedding dress hanging across the room. The long white gown is hands down the most beautiful piece of clothing I've ever owned. It's definitely my dream dress. Our wedding is like a magical fairytale.

When the doorknob turns, I know who it is before the door opens. There is only one person who would walk in without knocking—it might be untraditional to have the groom see the bride before the ceremony, but nothing about our relationship has been traditional. Dutch slips into the room wearing his tux, sans the jacket. He looks so good, with his hair and beard trimmed and his shiny black dress shoes. I can't get over the fact that this man owns a custom-made tux, a gorgeous one at that.

When he stops to peer out the crack in the door before shutting it, I have to admit that is strange behavior for my rough and rugged biker.

“Is everything okay, babe?” I ask.

He immediately straightens up and turns to look at me. Whatever was bothering him seems quickly forgotten as his eyes slide over me from head to toe.

I smooth my hair back. Tiffany supervised the hairdresser, who gave me an elegant updo. I know it’s perfection, but I don’t know if it’s going to hold. “Is my hair falling down?”

He closes the distance between us in a few steps and goes to his knees in front of me. “No. Your hair looks amazing. Even the crown suits you. I’m afraid to tell you, Ms. Covington, that you married beneath your station.”

“You sound like you swallowed a Victorian novel,” I say with a chuckle.

He grins unrepentantly. “The fact remains that you outclass me in every conceivable way, sunshine. Today, you’re making me the luckiest man on earth.”

“Would you like to be luckier still?”

He takes one of my hands in his. The happiness radiating off him today is brilliant. “I’m always up for another pleasant surprise, sweetness.”

I take his hand and turn it so his palm is against my flat stomach. “Are we taking bets on whether it’s going to be a boy or girl?”

If I thought his face couldn’t get any happier, I’d have been sadly mistaken. The smile that jumps onto his face makes him look twice as handsome. “We’re going to have another child?”

I nod. “Yes. I took several pregnancy tests and they all came back positive this morning.”

“That is amazing news,” he says as he wraps his arms around me.

The next thing I know, I'm sitting in his lap as he gushes, "I can't believe I'm getting married to the woman of my dreams and finding out we're having another child all in the same day. If this keeps up, I'm going to start thinking of myself a luckiest man alive."

"You say that now, but when we've got two kids running around, you're gonna get tired of chasing them."

"Don't worry. I've been thinking about what to do if we end up with a parcel of little ones." His voice takes on an edge of mirth as he tells me all about his diabolic plans. "I was thinking about leashing them. They make kid harnesses that go around their chests."

"That's so nineties. People don't leash their kids anymore."

"With my genes we're gonna have a herd of tearaways."

I smile, "Chase is a good boy, he's got to be the most responsible five-year-old I know."

"Yeah, but he didn't have his daddy's bad influence growing up," Dutch says with a wink.

I reach up to adjust his bowtie. "Maybe we'll get a leash for their father then?" When I can't get his tie to lay right, I untie it and start re-tying it.

He laughs, but I'm still getting the sense that he's worried about something.

"What's with the anxiety? You aren't getting pre-wedding jitters are you, babe?"

"Never, sunshine, I can't wait for you to officially be my old lady. It's just I thought this wedding was just going to be you, me, your sister, and the brothers. There are almost more caterers, servers, florists, photographers, and musicians than there are guests. They make me nervous."

"Just pretend they're not there. That's what I do."

There is a light knock at the door. I can tell it's our son, so I say, "Come in, Chase."

He slips into the room, looking just about as adorable as his father. He's wearing a dark tux with no jacket as well.

"What happened to your jacket, sweetie?"

"It's with Dad's." He drops down on the floor near us and asks, "Am I getting a brother or sister soon?"

"What? No. Yes. Maybe."

Chase and I both turn to look Dutch, who's clearly panicking.

"Sorry," he says sheepishly.

Chase props his elbows on his legs and pouts.

Dutch immediately backtracks. "Maybe. Why do you ask, son?"

He grins. "It was my wishes."

"Um, what wishes, sweetie?" I ask, all kinds of confused.

"Remember, with my cake? Dad said I got six years' worth of wishes to use, so I wished for you and Dad to get married and I wished for a baby brother."

"I see," he says before turning back to Chase. "We won't know for sure until your mommy sees a doctor, but you might be right kiddo."

Chase throws himself back onto the floor and pumps his fists in the air. Then, all of a sudden, he stops his little mini celebration and sits up looking ten kinds of serious. "No girls. Promise no girls."

I frown at my small son. "We don't get to choose, honey. We end up with what God sends us."

He thinks about that for a minute and does some finger counting then says, “If it’s a girl, I have four more wishes, right? So I’ll have a brother.”

“Brothers are cool, but so are sisters. Trust me on this. You’ll love them whether they’re a boy or girl,” Dutch promises.

When our son doesn’t immediately warm to the idea, Dutch says, “You know, I don’t have any brothers either, so I made friends that turned into my brothers. All the men in the club are my brothers. You are pretty close to Siege’s son, Tommy. One day, you’ll probably grow up and become club brothers along with lots of other guys.”

That wipes the troubled look off his face. “I like Tommy. He wants a leather vest with his name on it like you got me.”

Dutch nods. “I believe he has a birthday coming up. We’ll get one made for him. Would you like that?”

“Yeah, I’m gonna go tell him.”

“Okay,” I call as he runs out of the room. “Don’t get dirty.”

Dutch grins at me. “That went much better than I thought it would.”

“Thanks to you,” I say as I give him a kiss on the lips. “Though we might want to disabuse him of the idea that all of his wishes come true—unless we want to try for a houseful of kids.”

“A houseful isn’t such a bad thing if that’s what life has in store for us. But as long as I am with you everything will be perfect.”

Dutch wraps his hand around the back of my neck, and when his mouth covers mine, I know all the way down to my bones that there’s nothing the two of us can’t face if we do it together. Sitting in his lap is my happy place. The knowledge that I’m carrying another of his babies makes my heart sing with happiness. This truly is that happiest day of my life.

THE END

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About the Author

Aria Ray writes suspenseful, hot, and intense romance stories featuring powerful alpha-men and witty heroines, full of sacrifice, love, and happily-ever-afters.

Like the heroines of her novels, Aria has always had a crush on sinfully sexy bad boys – dark, controlling, irresistible, but tender and loving.

When she is not writing or daydreaming about new stories, she loves to spend time with her own gang of alpha males – a husband and twin boys.

But the real mob boss of the family is Don Corleone – the cat.

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