



**RIG'S**  
*Ward*

SAVAGE LEGION MC

ARIA RAY

*Rigs' Ward*

*(Savage Legion MC, Book 4)*

Aria ray

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Savage Legion MC

Book 4 - Rigs' Ward

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## *About the Book:*

**Sometimes, even a heavenly blessing needs a badass guardian, even if he's a bit on the fallen side...**

As a former preacher, I used to ramble about God's mysterious ways. Now, I'm living that sermon. Just when I'm knee-deep in the sh\*t, drowning it out with booze while feeding prospects some wisdom, in comes Mattie – a godsend with chocolate curls and the brightest blue eyes I've ever seen.

Since crossing paths with her, I'm hooked, and it ain't just about looks. Mattie, taking charge at CPS after her boss kicked the bucket, is on a mission to rescue missing kids and take down the syndicate. Nothing spooks her; she's a damn warrior, much like I used to be back in my military days.

I know a sweet angel like her won't want a battle-hardened, cynical bastard like me, but I can't just watch from a distance, like some sick old f\*\*k, with those syndicate assholes circling her. So, I'm in, ready to protect her and the teen she's fighting for.

But can my old combat skills keep Mattie safe? And what happens when the kid we're trying to save becomes family we can't let go?

It's a twisted ride, but damn well worth it...

**“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)

**Rigs' Ward** (Book 4)

**Smoke's Flame** (Book 5)

# *Chapter 1*

## *Rigs*

### *Four Months Ago*

I'm one pathetic fucker tonight. I've been sitting in the clubhouse nursing my whiskey for hours, obsessing about my best friend taking the woman I've got my sights set on to a fancy ball at the governor's mansion. Seeing Dutch dressed up to the nines in his tuxedo with an aqua colored tie was quite amusing, and I might have had more fun ripping him for looking like some fucking city slicker, if it wasn't for who his date was. Owning his own tux is why they asked him to be Mattie's protector instead of me tonight. Well, that and the fact he's presentable in society and Cleo, our president's wife, clearly thought I wasn't. Maybe she was onto something, other than being in Mattie's company, the thought of having to schmooze with the kind of moneyed lowlifes at those places made my flesh creep.

Slamming my empty shot glass down onto the table I resist the urge to throw it against the wall just to see it shatter. Maybe it would release some of my tension. Images rise in my mind of Dutch having his hands on her as they twirled around the dance floor. She would be happy to have one of the brothers escorting her at short notice. The thought of her smiling up at him as they danced made my stomach clench, she'd needed a plus one and considering everything going on with the syndicate, it seemed better to have a member of Savage Legion accompanying her. Yeah, we're scary fuckers when we want to be. Dutch is tall, ripped, and handsome, so I guess he's the ideal partner. I know I can scrub up okay, and it's not like I'm some swamp creature, but the thing is, he's charming and I'm not. That's where he has the edge over me.

God knows, women like charming. That means there is every reason to suspect she's going to fall in love with him at the Enchantment Under the Fucking Sea Ball. Then I'll have



to stand by and watch as she makes googly eyes at him. They'd probably hang out at the club, snuggle up in one of the booths and kiss. Fucking hell, they might even get frisky in the pool room like some couples around here do. The thought of him covering her in one of the dark corners made me furious.

I've never been so emotional about a woman in my entire life. That's why it is a particularly bad time for Lori to approach me.

"Hey Rigs, you look like you're having a rough night. Would you like some company? I'm a good listener."

I throttle back my anger at the world and shake my head vehemently. "Not tonight, Lori. I'm not fit company for man nor beast."

She takes a step closer and smiles at me. "Then it's a good thing I'm neither of those things, what you need is a woman."

"Seriously Lori, I want to be left alone." I say firmly.

She gestures to my zipper. "At least let me give you a release. It's the least I can do for all the ones you've given me over the years, all the women here really. You really look like you need it."

Yeah, despite the cross around my neck I'm no angel and I've had my share of the club girls. I don't know if it's age, or just me being a cranky bastard, but all that baseless fucking is getting old. Maybe it's seeing my club brothers all getting coupled up that's doing it. And now Dutch is dancing the night away with Mattie. "I appreciate the offer, but the problem I'm having won't be diminished by a quickie. Trust me on that, sweetheart."

She takes a step back, a look of hurt on her pretty face. "I wasn't trying to add to your problems. I hope you get over whatever's bothering you and feel better soon."

"I doubt that will happen, but thanks for understanding and for respecting my no."

"Not a problem," she responds quietly. "If you change your mind, just let me know."

I motion for Mel to bring me another drink. She hurries to pour me another double whiskey on the rocks and brings it to me without a word. Mel is a class act all the way. She instinctively knows when to let us be, and when to offer to talk. I respect her a lot, as do the other brothers. Truth be told, I even respect Lori. The club girls hang out at the clubhouse because they like us and aren't shy about offering sex. There had been times in the past when that had made all the difference in the world to me.

Not since meeting Mattie though. After being introduced to her, all the other women in the world disappeared from my mind. Now there was only Mattie and her pretty brown curls. Mattie and her wire rimmed glasses that kept slipping down her nose. Mattie and her pretty blue eyes. Her dedication to working with our club to find those missing kids and put the syndicate out of business. She was so fucking brave. Nothing scares her off, even when her former boss wound up dead and tossed behind the dumpster at their office. Since Siege married her best friend, she's been in my orbit for quite a while. I know she's single, but she always seems so self-contained. Plus, why would a sweet young thing like that want a battle hardened, cynical bastard like me?

So instead, I watch her from afar like some lovesick teenager. Mattie took over her former boss' job and given what we know about them, I can't bear the thought of those syndicate assholes getting to her too. I continue sipping my second drink of the night and obsessing over Mattie until the bar is empty and Mel has locked the front door and moved to the bar in the basement. She left the whiskey on the counter so I can pour my own if I want. The few remaining brothers wander downstairs with whatever lady they're entertaining for the evening, leaving me by myself with only my thoughts for company. The fact that they're all having varying degrees of sexual contact right now doesn't bother me one bit. I couldn't care less what my club brothers do with their dicks. Well, there's one who I hope is keeping his dick zipped up behind his fancy tuxedo pants. I take another mouthful of whiskey and feel the burn as it slides down my throat, it's gonna be a long night.

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Unfortunately, I'm all too sober when the last person I want to see comes strolling into the clubhouse.

Dutch looks like a fucking gentleman spy in that fancy tux of his. It pisses me off no end, that Cleo didn't think of me when looking for a protector to escort Mattie to that fancy ass party tonight, and it makes me wonder just how the others see me.

"You look like a date with Cleo's friend agreed with you," I say in cold tone. May as well bite the bullet now and get it over and done with.

Dutch's head snaps up to look at me. His expression is confused, so I clarify it for him.

"Are we gonna see romance on the horizon for the two of you?" Okay, there's a sneer in my voice that I didn't mean to let slip out.

He holds up both hands, as if to ward off my ire. His fancy bowtie is dangling from one hand. He explains cautiously, "I already warned Cleo that Mattie is not my type."

While I'm relieved my longtime friend isn't interested in her, I feel a spark of anger. Does he think Mattie isn't good enough for him? She's amazing and would be a catch for any man. I rise to my feet. "Is it because she's disabled?"

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

I don't like the way he's looking at me like I've lost my fucking mind. I sit my ass back down in the chair by sheer force of will alone.

Dutch walks over, drops down in the chair across from me with a thunk. Then he reaches over to a nearby table, grabs a half empty glass of beer one of our club brothers had left behind and drinks it down in one gulp. Man, he must have had a bad night if he was willing to drink that shit.

"Want me to pull you a fresh beer?"

“No, I’m good,” he responds flippantly. My club brother is acting ten kinds of fucking weird tonight. He said he’s not interested in Mattie, but something happened at that ball. If he tells me that he’s fallen in love with her, I’m going to beat his ass. I’ve already decided that much.

He leans forward and stares at me for so long it starts to make me uncomfortable. Finally, he asks, “Want to tell me why you’re so fucking interested in my evening?”

“I’m not you pretentious, tuxedo wearing prick,” I shoot back hotly.

His gaze turns assessing, as he can’t figure out what my problem is. “Correct me if I’m wrong but we don’t normally go at each other this way.”

“You started it,” I state flatly. I don’t want to admit that I’m borderline freaking out because he’s possibly fucking dating the woman I want, because that would be a shitty thing for me to do, considering he hasn’t had a real relationship in his lifetime that I know of. By all rights, I should be happy for my friend. If he were interested in any other woman on the face of the earth I would be, but not Mattie.

Understanding lights up his face. “You said that you weren’t interested in my evening. That must mean you were interested in Mattie’s evening.”

I start to stand up again, fully prepared to go jump onto my bike and ride through the night until my mind can deal with this fucked up situation.

Dutch grabs my shirt and slams me back down before I can get fully to my feet. “If you like Cleo’s friend, why the fuck didn’t you speak up?”

I glare at him, angrier with my friend than I had ever been before. It was more jealousy than anger, but I didn’t want to look at that too closely right now. “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.”

Relief flashes across his face and he lets go of my shirt, smoothing it back down in a vague attempt to get rid of the

wrinkles he made. I slap his hand away because it felt like he was petting me like I was a dog or something.

He holds up both hands in a gesture meant to calm me down. “Alright brother, I’m gonna be 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.”

That was fucking doubtful. Those were exactly the kinds of things women liked, all the things I was bad at. “Shows how much you know. All women love high heels. They collect shoes like men do pocketknives.”

“Not Mattie,” he insists. “She only wears kitten heels.” Dutch sounds absolutely certain of his facts on this one. It galls me that he knows more about Mattie than I do. “What in the hell are those?”

He explains, sounding more like a professor of female fashion than my longtime club brother. “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.”

I grudgingly admit he could be right. “Well, I guess that makes sense. I think it’s clever how she found that work around.”

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

It cheers me up to hear him say nice things about the woman I was crushing on so hard it took my breath away. “I noticed that too,” I state quietly. “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?”

Why does this fucker keep talking about Mattie’s one flaw, if you could consider having a medical issue a flaw that is. I guess he can tell by the look on my face that I don’t like him talking about her that way, because he started trying to talk me down.

“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 make her way around and 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.”

I’m not proud to admit it, but dark glee fills every corner of my heart to hear him say that, because it means she doesn’t like him. If she did, she would have wanted to spend more time with him. She didn’t invite him in for coffee or any shit like that either. “I like hearing about how Mattie’s evening went.”

Dutch gives me an indulgent smile. “Give me your phone, you stupid fucker.”

I pull out my phone, finger in the code and slide it across the table to him. I can’t imagine what he wants with my phone, but finding out Mattie doesn’t want him, puts him right back at the top of my friend list. It occurs to me that he might have taken a picture of her all dressed up. “Did you take pictures?” I ask hopefully. I sure would love to have a picture of her to look at when I’m thinking of her. Ugh... that makes me sound like a total creeper, but it would be nice. Just one photo.

“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.”

Shock roils through my gut. “Wait, I can’t call her.” Mattie probably doesn’t even remember me. And she sure didn’t show any special interest in me when Cleo introduced her to me at her and Siege’s wedding. Then again Mattie was introduced to a lot of brothers that day. Maybe she was simply overwhelmed.

Dutch’s voice turns stern. “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.”

I grab the phone from his hand and start to slide it back into my pocket, making an excuse to justify not calling her. I wasn't about to let my longtime friend know how petrified I was being rejected out of hand by this lovely creature. “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.”

Oh, that pisses me right off. I shoot Dutch a death glare and growl, “If you put a move on Mattie, you and I are gonna have a problem.”

He doesn't seem to take my lowkey threat very seriously. He just sits there saying nothing and waiting for me to change my mind. I press my phone against my forehead and try to talk myself into just giving her a friendly call. Something's holding me back and I'm not even sure what it is.

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

Ugly memories rise in my mind of the things I've done to protect this town and my club brothers. “You know that 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,” he responds empathetically.

I won't let myself off so easily. “I chose to kill.”

“Somebody had to do it, brother.” Yeah, he's not wrong about that.

When I don't immediately reply, he asks, “Do you do it because you enjoy it?”

I'm disgusted by his question. “Fuck no. It tears me up inside.”

“Then leave it for someone else to do.” His suggestion shows he doesn't understand how killing wounds the human soul. Each kill blackens it further, my soul is already damaged.

“I can’t,” I whisper, “cos then it will tear them up inside instead and I don’t want that.”

“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?” The shock in his voice shows my old friend is innocent about some of life’s darkness. Of course he is, because I’ve been protecting him from having to experience the most savage part of life, killing in defense of those you love.

I nod, grinding my phone against my forehead until it hurts. I whisper my deepest, darkest fear, “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. You still believe in God, right?”

My head jerks up because I never thought any of my club brother would question my dedication to God. “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 not wrong about that. Women were designed to tame our hearts and keep us connected to all that’s good and pure in the world.

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

“Yes.” That’s true. I need to protect my Mattie, make sure nothing bad happens to her.

Dutch states quietly, “Well, I dropped Mattie off at her apartment. She’s all alone, vulnerable with no one to protect her while she’s investigating these missing kids. You already know that last woman in her job was murdered by those evil syndicate 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?”



Suddenly all the worry about abstract shit falls away, and what remains is the fact that Mattie needs a protector, someone who can keep her safe. Taking a deep breath, I tell him, “I should probably check on her.”

Dutch gives me some sage advice that I immediately take to heart. “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 just bet you anything she takes you up on it.”

Yes. That’s exactly what I need to do. She shouldn’t be trying to do this on her own. “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.”

When he walks off, I’m left alone in the bar area once more. My phone is in my hand, and I stare at her details. All I need to do is tap on her name, how hard can it be to make a fucking phone call?

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### *Present day*

I’m sitting at the clubhouse bar, nursing a whiskey, and musing over all the bad choices I’ve made in life. Yeah, it’s that kind of night. Though in my ever-increasing list of things I did wrong, I think not calling Mattie is at the very top.

It’s been almost five months since Dutch gave me her number and I’ve done shit about it. I’d gotten close a couple of times, but then chickened out. What would a sweet, young woman want with an old biker like me? I mean I know I’m not ancient, and I’m probably only fifteen years older than her, maybe less, but still—she’s so lovely and fresh.

I’ve seen too much shit in life, my soul is too dark, and I can’t let that darkness affect another person.

Normally I’m okay with my life choices, I’m a lone wolf. I was never interested in having a woman, whenever my cock needed release there was always some club chick ready and

willing. Apparently, I was considered to be the owner of one of the prime cocks in the clubhouse. An honor I used to take pride in, but now it just seems empty.

What's changed? Mattie. I can't get her out of my mind.

Since my club brother and best friend, Dutch, got back with Joy and is happily married, it hit home that I'm the last of my brothers who doesn't have an old lady. It never used to bother me before, but now at forty-five I've had enough of that lifestyle. Maybe it's an age thing. But I know better, it's not. It's a Mattie thing, she's all I can think about.

"Hey, handsome. Looking for some company?" It's Lori, one of the club girls I'd had a thing with once—well, by thing, I'd fucked her a few times. I think she has hopes of making me her old man, but that isn't happening. This evening, she's looking smoking hot in a pair of bootie shorts and a crop top. Her full lips a glossy red as her tongue snakes over them trying to make me remember how good her mouth had felt on my cock. But it isn't working tonight, or last night, or pretty much any damn night for the last however many months.

"Not tonight sweetheart," I say as I toss back my whiskey.

"If you don't watch out, your cock's gonna rust," she pouts.

I gaze at her, but don't respond.

"Come on, at least let me suck you off," she says licking her wet lips again and sucking her finger for emphasis.

"No can do." I say as I look around for Mel to top up my glass. She's gone, and given the time I suppose she must be tending bar in the basement where the prospects hang out.

Lori takes my refusal as a challenge and waves over Brandy, her partner in crime, who grins at me widely. "Come on, Daddy," she says teasingly. "Special offer tonight, buy one get one free."

She twirls around and bends over showing her thong panties. I might have found their little display amusing a few months ago. Hell, I might have taken them up on their offer of a threesome. But tonight, I just found the whole damn show depressing.

“Come on, you gotta use it or lose it,” She whines.

I shake my head, they sure are being determined. I wonder for a moment if Mel, our bartender has put them up to it. She’s another one who keeps telling me I need to settle down. But I push that thought away, maybe Mel does think I need to get myself an old lady, but she knows none of us would settle for one of the club girls. I smile up at them, trying to keep my cool and not be angry at their antics, “I’m okay, you have a good evening, ladies. If you’re after fun, go see the twins, they’re in the basement and I hear they’re at a loose end.”

Vapor and Haze were the only patched in brothers left at the clubhouse tonight. They were good kids, but at nineteen I feel like their father when I’m around them, and sometimes I just want to sit in peace.

Shit. Is this what my life is coming to? Drinking alone at the bar, turning away pussy while my cock slowly withers away from lack of use? Though to be honest, it isn’t the sex thing, what I crave now is companionship. Like Siege, Rider, Tank, and Dutch all had. I want someone to come home to after a hard day, a soft, caring woman who will soothe my troubled soul, and in return I will protect her and nurture her.

God moves in mysterious ways. In my days as a minister, I had said that enough times to try and explain the shit that happens in people’s lives. Everything happens for a reason—that’s another gem with fewer religious connotations. But same shit, however you say it. I’ve been given this chance and I’ve squandered it. Sighing, I pull out my cell phone and scroll down my contacts. For the millionth time I look at the details Dutch entered, and my finger hovers over her name.

## Chapter 2

### *Mattie*

It's almost midnight when my phone rings. I'm at my kitchen table, rummaging through a new box of paperwork. Without looking to see who's calling I answer, thinking it's probably Cleo. No one else knows that I'm such a night owl.

Grinning to myself, I say, "Hello. Thank you for calling Night Owl's Missing Person's Detective Agency. How may I help you." I shouldn't joke about investigating missing kids but sometimes I use humor to keep from allowing this situation to pull me down into the depths of a depression I might never escape from.

When a masculine voice snorts a laugh, I realize it's not Cleo calling me. He says, "You probably don't remember me but—"

I cut him off mid-sentence. "You're Rigs. Dark hair, neatly trimmed beard, brown eyes and real polite. I recognize your voice from when Cleo introduced us. You were the only biker wearing dress pants with your cut. I remember you were wearing a black button-up shirt and an ornate cross. Cleo said you were minister."

There is a slight pause and then he responds, "I'm impressed. Most women don't remember me at all. I usually have to introduce myself two, sometimes three times before they remember my name."

"Nonsense," I insist. "I was pleased to meet you. My grandfather was a minister. I was raised to respect men and women of faith."

"Well, I'm more of a spiritual advisor than a traditional minister."

"That's fascinating," I state, wondering what the difference is in his mind.

“I’m wanted to offer to assist in your search for the missing children. I’d like to help in whatever capacity you need and be your personal liaison with the Savage Legion. I’m a former Marine Chaplain and have experience talking to people about issues surrounding grief and trauma.”

I pause for a moment, taken aback by his sudden request and the late-night call. But then I consider what he’s suggested and can’t think of a single reason not to accept his help. He’s a trusted person because he was with the Savage Legion. Their club president is married to my best friend and partner in hunting down the missing children. I would be a fool to turn down a minister’s help, especially one with prior experience supporting people in crisis. He could be helpful in so many ways.

“Alright,” I reply. “I accept your help. I don’t feel comfortable meeting in public with the case files, because I have too much confidential information that needs going through. My apartment is a bit small though.”

Before I can continue, he offers a workable solution. “I have an office at the clubhouse. It’s not exactly large, but it should be spacious enough for us to work in. I also have file cabinets that lock. If you’re working with confidential information, you’ll want to have them double locked for safety.”

This man is just the kind of person I need on my side. He’s familiar with the protocols for handling sensitive material. I glance around at all the boxes sitting around my apartment, I really shouldn’t be keeping stuff like that at home—but given what Cleo and I had uncovered we didn’t know how high the corruption went. “If you’re sure it’s no imposition, securing all my investigative notes and files in your office would really help. It’s kind of taking over my apartment right now.”

“It’s no imposition at all. I can even help you transport it in one of our secured vans.”

“That’s amazing, thank you.”

“Mattie, after seeing what the poor kids we rescued had gone through, it’s the least I can do. I’m willing to do

whatever it takes to bring those kids home. Anything you need, I'm there for it."

Hearing the sincerity in his voice affects me more profoundly than I imagine such an offer would. There was something special and unique about this man.

"I work from eight in the morning until four in the afternoon, so it will be mostly evenings and weekends. Is that going to cut into your personal life?"

There's a short burst of laughter down the phone. "Personal life? What's that? I normally just hang out at the club in the evenings, and I've been looking for something productive to do with my time on the weekend. Now, I suppose that I'll more to do than I can handle."

"You're not wrong about that," I respond. "I've got a massive amount of information to go through on each case, everything from case records, medical records, police reports and sometimes eyewitness interviews."

"We could start a board for each case, kind of like cops do. Sometimes it's easier to see connections when you look at it visually."

My excitement surges. "Yes, that's a great idea. I wanted to do something like that but just didn't have the space to pull it off in my apartment. Your offer of help couldn't have come at a better time. I was starting to get really overwhelmed."

"I can come bright and early in the morning and help you pack up and transport all your records if you like. If that's too soon maybe we could do it one evening this coming week."

"Tomorrow would be fantastic, I'll make coffee around nine in the morning and start packing everything up. You come on by whenever is good for you."

"I'll be there as close to nine as possible."

"Great Rigs. I'll text you my address."

"I'll let you get some sleep. Tomorrow's going to be a busy day."

"Thanks again. Sleep tight and don't let the bedbugs bite."

He chuckles. “My mother used to say that.”

“She was clearly a wise woman,” I say warmly.

After the call ended, I hold the phone to my chest, allowing the awesomeness of this moment to settle over me. This is the best possible thing that could have happened for our cause at this point. With any luck having a secure hub to work out of, and another set of trained eyes looking over the material will get us one step closer to finding those kids.

My phone rings against my chest and I look down to see that this time it actually is Cleo.

“Hello, Cleo. Did you get the twins down?”

“Yeah, both sets. We’re up to our knees in kids these days.” Her voice is tired but happy.

“Don’t complain. I know you love it.”

“Oh yeah, I’m living the life. Thing One actually puked on my favorite shirt today.”

“It’s cute how you call the new babies Thing One and Thing Two. My mom used to read that Dr. Seuss book to me all the time when I was a kid.”

My friend laughs, “Siege is getting them onesies that look exactly like the outfits in the book.”

“Aww, that actually sounds pretty cute.”

“Any idea who’s getting the DA gig yet, and whether we might be able to get them on board with actually prosecuting the big wig in charge of the syndicate?” Cleo asks, her tone all business now.

“They put Assistant DA Ervin Yaran in charge for now. He seems like a decent enough guy. I’d like to give it a bit and see what kind of cases he prosecutes. He will be handling the David Henderson case. So far, he hasn’t dropped the charges or done anything crazy.”

“Thank God for small miracles,” Cleo says sarcastically.

“I have some good news,” I add brightly.

“Good, because this exhausted momma could sure use some.”

“Siege’s friend, Rigs, called tonight and he’s offered to let me use an office at the clubhouse. He even volunteered to help me organize the material on each case and start a crime board.”

“Wow! That’s awesome, it’s difficult to try and work out of boxes. The clubhouse is practically a fort. All our information will be secure there, and if any of the bad guys want to get in then they’ll have to go through the Savage Legion first.”

“Rigs said the room should be spacious enough for both of us, so hopefully we’ll have enough room to work the cases properly.”

“Is this space his office? If so it’s huge.”

“Yes. He did say it was his private office. I wonder why he has so much personal space there.”

Cleo snorts a laugh, “Maybe because he’s been camped out there since the dawn of time.”

“What? He lives there?” I ask incredulously. While Rigs had been in my thoughts on and off, I had assumed like the other brothers he had an apartment or house elsewhere.

“Near enough, Siege says he’s there most of the time. Maybe he came with the building?” Cleo says.

I laugh, “Come on, the man can’t be that old.”

“I think he’s in his early forties,” she responds.

“He doesn’t look a day over thirty-five to me.”

“Don’t tell me you’re interested in hot bikers with a heart of gold now.”

“Perish the thought. If I were going to pick a biker, it wouldn’t be their minister, he’s probably taken a vow of celibacy.”

“You’re one to talk, when was the last time you got laid? Anyway, he’s not that kind of a religious leader. He doesn’t give sermons or anything like that. I think he’s more like a life



coach or personal counselor that gives advice based on wholesome values, rather than a strict interpretation of religious dogma. I don't know the full story, but from what Siege says, I think he kind of gave up on organized religion."

I consider this information, and file it away for further perusal at another time. "The only thing I care about is that he's helping us find those missing kids."

"And the fact that he's pure eye candy has nothing to do with your current excitement, right?"

"I'm feeling really attacked right now, though I don't think he sees me in that way."

"He's a man, you're gorgeous, of course he's going to like what he sees. And look all you want. The brothers in that clubhouse love to get noticed. They thrive on female attention the way we do coffee."

"Well, I'll try to be extra nice to him and stroke his ego because he's going above and beyond to help us on the most important task of our professional career."

"I have a good feeling about Rigs volunteering his time. He's a smart man who could only be an asset."

"I agree. He's coming bright and early in the morning to help me pack up and transport our files."

"I'll try to meet you at the clubhouse later. If I can manage to wrangle Siege into finding someone to help him with the kids."

We say our goodbyes and I yawn behind my hand so hard it makes my jaw ache. Closing the file I had been reading, I put it back into the box. It's been a busy evening and I need to get some sleep before moving a roomful of file boxes tomorrow morning. I pad to my bedroom and slide into bed. My shower will have to wait until the morning. MS was a bitch, while I'd gotten used to the randomness of the flare-ups and my condition was pretty well controlled, the fatigue was sometimes overwhelming. Exhausted, I tumble off to sleep with high hopes of making progress on my cases.

## Chapter 3

### *Rigs*

I wake up early, shower and grab some coffee before heading to my office to clean and rearrange the furniture to make two work areas. The large bulletin board on one wall would be our clue board. I line up several six-foot tables, empty two large filing cabinets and rearrange a couple of chairs.

Once the room looked as good as I could make it, I'm on the road in one of our club vans. Once I reach Mattie's house, I'm lucky enough to find a parking space right in front of her door which should be handy if there's as much to move as she says.

When I get out of the van and approach, I see a tangled mass hanging from her doorknob. As I get closer and realize what it is, my blood runs cold. I pull it off and turn it over in my hand. It's a fabric doll that looks a lot like Mattie, like the ones that the cops use with abused kids, 'point to where the bad man touched you', that kind of shit. It's got her light brown hair and is wearing a pants suit. Someone's taken a red marker and put slash marks across the throat and used a purple marker to simulate bruises here and there. The doll has a big black eye on the right side of her face.

The more I look at the crude mess, the angrier I get. As well as the Mattie doll, there's a few kid-sized dolls tied to it. It's a pretty unpleasant sight and clearly designed to be a threat. The woman in position before her wound up dead in a dumpster, but Anita Adkins was working with the syndicate, and they had wanted to tie up loose ends. I'm guessing those bastards have gotten wind of Mattie and Cleo's unofficial investigation.

I ring the doorbell and listen to the sound reverberate through her ground floor apartment. It takes her a minute, but when she opens the door and sees what I've got in my hand

her face falls. “Not again. These syndicate members never give up.”

When she backs away from the door and waves me in, I follow her. Foregoing the pleasantries, I ask, “How long has this been going on, Mattie?”

She shrugs and traces one finger along the edge of the waist high console table in her foyer. “For a little while now. I don’t let it get to me. I’ve got a job to do, and I can’t let them scare me off.”

“Mattie, this is serious. You told anyone about this?” I ask gently.

“The police are already not doing anything except the bare minimum, you know what it’s like. I’m guessing someone on the payroll makes sure any investigation gets low priority. I don’t want to worry Cleo while she’s on leave, she’s got enough on her plate. And so does Siege, what with the new twins, the Hellfire Hounds MC still nipping at your heels and the syndicate are probably royally pissed off that you guys took out the regional leadership.”

I close my fist around the dolls. “Still, you should have said something. We can’t help you if we don’t know what’s going on.”

Glancing up at me through her thick lashes, she explains, “it doesn’t really matter whether they’re actively threatening me or not. I’m intelligent enough to know that as long as I’m looking for the kids they’ve taken, I’m a threat. I think this is more psychological warfare, and I refuse to let them terrorize me or scare me off.”

“That’s all well and good, but you know what the syndicate are like. Sure, they think they’re untouchable, but once their carefully crafted house of cards starts to fall, then they’re gonna look for payback. With David Henderson’s trial looming you could be in real danger.”

“The problem is I only have so much time and energy. I have to direct that where it’s needed the most—which is doing

my job and finding those kids. Worrying about what the syndicate might do to me interferes with that.”

This beautiful woman was tearing my heart out. “I need to know how many times they have threatened you, directly or indirectly?”

She slides out a drawer under the table. It’s filled with crumpled notes, a gingerbread man with his head cut off, another messed up doll and some other bits and pieces I can’t make out.

“Seriously Mattie? This isn’t just a halfhearted attempt to scare you, this shit is real. You know you’re not safe living here all by yourself, right?”

She shrugs and refuses to meet my eyes. “Someone’s got to care about those kids. You know from Cleo how corrupt the whole organization is, if I give up like the others then they vanish into thin air. I know this is dangerous, but what can I do? I can’t stop. Please don’t ask me to.”

“I would never ask you to stop your work. I know how important it is to you, that’s part of the reason I wanted to help you with the search,” I pick up one of the letters and take a look, it’s an old school threat with bits cut out from a newspaper or printed off a website. There’s a photo of Mattie which I guess is from the Child Protective Services website, someone scribbled out her eyes and drew what look like stitches on her mouth. Clearly a warning for her to stay quiet.

I steady my voice, trying to rein in the frustration. “Mattie, now I know about this, I have to step in and help you stay safe. If your life is at risk, then forget all your good intentions—with you out of the way then they’ve won.”

“I don’t know what it is you think you can do to protect me. It’s not like you can sit with me twenty-four seven.”

“The hell I can’t. You’re the only things standing between those kids and a lifetime of hell. I’m willing to do whatever it takes to keep you alive and get them home safely.” It was true, since leaving the military I’d been looking for a purpose in life, the club and my faith were all I had, but sometimes it

wasn't enough. Maybe protecting Mattie and helping her find those kids could help wash the darkness from my soul? Okay, it wasn't entirely altruistic, as I just wanted to be close to her, but if I could do that and do good then surely that had to account for something?

“Those are brave words. What's the plan?”

“The plan is I'm going to load up the van with all your boxes, and you're going to go pack a suitcase. I want you to stay at the clubhouse until figure out who's the last man standing in the syndicate is. Once we take him down, you can come home and get on with living your life.”

“Rigs. I can't live at your clubhouse. I really appreciate the offer, but this could take weeks or even months.”

“Is it the clubhouse itself that bothers you? It's not like a college frat house, if that's what you're worried about.” I laugh, to be honest sometimes it is, but mostly the horseplay happens downstairs. My club brothers who stay onsite are for the most part house-trained. I continue trying to convince her, “I know you've seen the downstairs bar, but the accommodation upstairs is good, we've got a couple of suites of self-contained apartments, as well as some basic rooms. I've been living there for years. I have a suite and you're welcome to stay with me. I'll sleep on the sofa, or if you want privacy, I can find some other place to bed down at the clubhouse.”

“I can't throw you out of your own home. Trust me, the stupid shit they leave hanging on my door it's not causing me to lose any sleep at night.”

“Yeah, but now I know about it, it's definitely gonna cost me to lose sleep.” I look at her, but she's still avoiding my eyes. Okay, time to play dirty. “If you want, I can call Cloe and let her know what's going on? I'm sure she wouldn't want you staying here all by yourself knowing you're being targeted by the syndicate.”

She throws up her hands in exasperation. “Fine Rigs. You win. I'll go live at the motorcycle club for God only knows how long so you don't worry over me.”

I can tell she's being sarcastic, but I don't care. The only thing that matters to me is keeping her safe. Bringing her to the clubhouse beats me sleeping in the van outside her door for the next few months.

"Go pack up, girly. I'll load the van, and we'll be out of here within thirty minutes."

She rolls her eyes and mutters something about me being a controlling bastard under her breath. Truth be told she's all kinds of cute when she's angry.

After she turns and walks away, I get busy moving her boxes. I stack them three deep and shove them in the back of the van, careful to lock the door between each trip. The street is clear, but with all those confidential files onboard I'm not taking any chances.

By the time I lock the van after the last load, Mattie's standing in the living room with her hands on her hips, surrounded by five suitcases and a duffel bag. I remember Dutch saying how down to earth she was when he took her to that ball. She looked pretty high maintenance to me, looks like my empty closets were gonna take some pummeling to fit all her stuff in.

"We're only going to the other side of town, not a round-the-world trip," I joke. Though looking at the number of suitcases I was pretty damn impressed at her speed at getting ready. "And how in the hell did you get it all packed so quickly?"

She just smirks at me. "If you want me to hang out at your place for a long time then I need all my gear."

"Gear?"

"Yeah, clothing, women's stuff, medication, my computer, and to be honest the duffel bag is all snacks."

I have a hard time keeping the smile off my face, she's a woman after my own heart. "Snacks huh? You know we have a fully equipped kitchen at the clubhouse, right?"

"No, I didn't know that, and I had no intention of starving myself."

“Well, that’s fine we’ll bring your snacks. If you need anything after you get there you let me, or the prospects know, and we’ll go get it for you.”

“Sounds like I’m going to be a prisoner?” Before I can answer, she stares at me sternly, “I’m a grown adult. You don’t tell me when I can come and go, I’m agreeing to come, because I admit, it was starting to get a bit scary. But I won’t answer to you, or anyone else. And just so you know, nothing or nobody is going to get in the way of me going to work every day. My work is my life, and I won’t let you interfere with that.”

“Calm down, Miss Mattie. I’m not trying to control you. I’m just trying to protect you. With David Henderson out of the way we’re getting close to dismantling the syndicate, but they’re gonna be upping their scare tactics. You can do whatever you normally do, but until the syndicate is destroyed, I want you to have one of us with you at all times. Do you realize how dangerous these people are? I know you were there when they tried to get at Cleo. But surely, she told you about Ivy and Joy?” I knew mentioning Tank and Dutch’s old ladies was a low blow, but if she didn’t know what happened to them—then she needed to. The syndicate were sick fuckers, and it was all well and good trying to be brave and standing up to them, but that didn’t help if you ended up chained in a room in one of their facilities.

She looks down at her feet and her shoulders slump. “Yeah, I know all that, and I understand. It’s just I’m used to being independent and not answering to anyone but myself.”

“And you’ll still have that. I know you’ll not be in your own home, but think of it as a fancy vacation. A few weeks at the Savage Legion Spa, you’ll come home a new woman.”

She laughs at that, and I’m pleased to see her smile. It must be awful having to pack up her life like this. But I can’t risk letting her stay here knowing that the syndicate have her in their sights. “That’s better. We can’t promise palm trees and white sandy beaches, but I hear rave reviews of the patio and grill out the back.”

“I’m sorry I reacted badly to your efforts to keep me safe. Just so you know I’m not normally this difficult to get along with.”

“That’s fine Miss Mattie. I know today was a huge curveball for both of us. We just need to continue cooperating and respecting each other and we’ll get through this.”

Before she can reply, I step forward and begin gathering up her suitcases. She grabs her purse and follows me out to the van, with her forearm crutches tucked under one arm. I notice she’s walking without them today. I was a bit curious as to what her disability is, but it’s none of my business.

I quickly load up the rest of her suitcases and grab the letters from the drawer under her hall table. After checking all the windows, I lock up and head back to the van. I can hear Mattie complaining bitterly to her friend about me leveraging her into staying at the clubhouse. I guess she decided to come clean to Cleo about the threats. I can tell by the look on her face that Cleo isn’t giving her the feedback she wants to hear, and if anything, she agrees with me that she’s far safer at the clubhouse. When I open the door and climb into the van, she cuts her call short and shoves her cell phone into her pocket.

“How is Miss Cleo today?”

“It’s not nice to eavesdrop. You know that, right?”

“Look, Mattie. I know you’re not happy with this situation. Truth be told neither am I. It bothers me when women associated with our club are in harm’s way. I know you’re upset and scared, please just trust me. I’ll make sure you get home as soon as possible.”

“I’m sorry I was rude to you just now, I shouldn’t be taking it out on you. It just seems like the stress in my life is constantly mounting and every time I feel like I have it under control something else comes along to throw me off balance.”

“You can’t face it all by yourself. There’s truth in the saying that there’s safety in numbers. That’s the kind of safety we’re extending to you today. There’s no shame in accepting it.”



“I just need a minute to get my thoughts in order and then when we get to the clubhouse, I’ll start working on organizing the case information. Having something to do always calms me down.”

“Idle hands are the devil’s workshop. Proverbs sixteen, twenty-seven.” I glance over at her, admiring her ability to roll with the punches. Suddenly, a smile lights up her face.

“I can’t believe you’re throwing Bible verses at me in my time of need.”

“Just felt it was fitting for the moment. Whether you believe in it or not, there’s often wise advice to be found in the good book.”

“I won’t argue that point. I do want to tell you something, Rigs. You’re a really nice man, thank you for helping me find those kids. I appreciate it more than you know.”

Her words warm up my heart. “I like you too, Mattie. And I have a lot of respect for you. I believe that you and Cleo are doing God’s work on earth by protecting those little ones.”

## Chapter 4

### *Mattie*

I'm embarrassed for being so irritable with Rigs earlier. It's just my luck those assholes chose today of all days to send me another of their shitty warnings. I've been trying to convince myself that's it's nothing, but it's been escalating. I hadn't wanted to say anything to Cleo, she's on leave, and anyway I'm her supervisor so anything like that is my responsibility. Like I said to Rigs, I had reported the first couple of letters to the police, but they just took a statement and that was about it.

It's pretty clear that I have been underestimating the danger, but by the same token I'm sure Rigs is overestimating it. I guess it's a moot issue now that we're pulling into the clubhouse. I feel like a traveler in a strange land with my five suitcases and snack duffle. My only guide on this wayward adventure is a hot minister wearing a Savage Legion cut. Rigs is a contradiction in almost every sense of the word. Though if we're going to be working together, I need to get my little crush on him under control, he's a freaking minister for crying out loud, I can't be lusting after him. Anyway, if he was into dating—could ministers even date? Or was that just priests—men didn't see me in that way anymore. To them I was something to be pitied, and it had been that way pretty much since my diagnosis. Ugh... apart from the creeps that either had a thing about women with disabilities, or those who wanted to take control.

I have to hand it to Rigs though. He must have called ahead because as soon as we pull up, half a dozen prospects run out to the van and start unloading the boxes. I'm standing around taking in my surroundings, I've been to the clubhouse before with Cleo, but I'd been too distracted to pay it much notice. Aside from the garage and the front bar area, the place is far bigger than I thought, and I wonder if it was purpose built or

had been used for another purpose originally. Maybe a residential school or something?

Pulled from my reverie when a couple of the prospects return for my suitcases, I motion for them to stop, or at least leave something for me to do. I feel bad that they're rushing around after me.

Rigs shakes his head, "Leave them, it's their job."

I now understand the dynamic going on with the prospects. They are in the proving stage, where they're looking for opportunities to make themselves useful to the brothers. They all seem like nice guys, so I make sure to thank each one for their help.

As we walk into the clubhouse, Rigs asks, "Did you have a chance to have breakfast yet?"

"I'm afraid not and I'm starving. I was just about to dive into my snack bag. You're welcome to join me if you like."

"As tempting as that is, I'm going to pass. I would like you to join me for breakfast on the patio. Part of being your protector is making sure that your basic needs are met and that includes food."

There's something about him I can't quite put my finger on, the way he talks and acts makes me think of a different time. I don't even bother to comment on how taking care of my basic needs is in no way shape or form his responsibility. Instead, I just roll with it. "Breakfast I don't have to cook? Leave the way, Mr. Rigs."

"It's just Rigs, no mister. You have a nice way about you Miss Mattie. I really like that about you."

"Thank you," I was about to say that he did too, but stop myself before we got into some kind of compliment competition. I actually found his sometimes, old-fashioned way of speaking to be really sweet, I realize now what he made me think of—the old Western movies that my dad used to love. Many would have a quiet preacher character, who would end up being all badass. That's what Rigs reminds me of, though I guess old time cowboys and bikers aren't too

dissimilar, I take a minute to examine my surroundings as I follow him further into to the Bar area. I have become familiar with parts of the clubhouse from being Cleo's guest over the last few months. We grab a table that have been set up with the tablecloth, tableware and a carafe of coffee. Looks like someone was expecting us. I suspect Rigs arranged this for us, because it doesn't make sense that any of these rough bikers would think to do something like that.

"The coffee smells amazing," I announce as we sat down.

"One of the prospects make a special blend of beans and grinds them fresh every day. We've all been spoiled by his talent as of late."

I respond brightly, "Well, I feel like I'm on vacation already, it sure smells better than my local coffee shop."

Rigs chuckles. "We aim to please, Miss Mattie. I don't know what you like for breakfast. I asked him for a traditional breakfast of bacon, eggs, and toast with some fresh fruit on the side. I hope that will be okay. But if you prefer cereal or something else, I'm sure we can do that. Though it might be mermaid cereal as Rider's daughter Amy's obsessed with the stuff."

My mouth is watering just thinking about the bacon and eggs, I haven't been eating as well as I should lately. I haven't been doing a lot of things as well as I should lately. My neurologist is always telling me that with MS, while medication is important, so is keeping a healthy lifestyle. Plenty of sleep, avoiding stress and good nutrition. Though that's easier said than done, especially when you've been receiving threats, and your workload has tripled. I smile at him, "Bacon and eggs sound perfect!"

"One order of bacon, eggs and toast coming up. How would you like your eggs?"

I'm tempted to joke with him and say I'd love eggs benedict, but the trouble he's gone to, I really think he'd be out there telling the prospects to make it. "However, you're having them is fine by me."

“Scrambled it is then,” he says as he gestures to the young guy lurking by the door. “Miss Mattie will have her eggs scrambled as well.”

“On it,” the prospect says as he skuttles inside.

## Chapter 5

### *Rigs*

**B**efore I could really get the conversation rolling, the prospects brought our food out. After that, we were focused on eating rather than talking. That didn't bother me because I knew that I would be getting a lot of face-to-face time with Mattie. I was definitely looking forward to getting to know her better. Besides her classic natural beauty, and dedication to her job, the one quality that jumped out at me was her sense of humor. Although I could tell she used it as a coping technique when she was stressed, it still gave her a quirky personality that looked good on her.

After taking a few bites, she speaks, "You mentioned that you've been living here for a long time. Do you mind if I ask why?"

I swallow my mouthful and take a drink of coffee before I answer her question. Mostly to think over what I want to say. I want to get to know this woman better, and I don't want to sugarcoat things for her. While I'm under no illusion that she'd be interested in having a romantic relationship with someone like me, I want to be honest with her.

"I never really knew my father and my mother passed away when I was thirteen. I went off the rails a bit, I'm not proud of what I did, but it wasn't until two good men took me under their wings that I started to straighten out. One was the minister at the local church—he was the reason I ended up studying theology, I wanted to give back to the community—the other was Siege's dad. He was like the father I never had, and he taught me how to ride. Once I'd become ordained, I actually joined the military and was proud to serve and follow in his footsteps." I pause, remembering Claw. He would be proud to see how his son had turned the club around after the mess Butch made of it. "You already know that Siege is our club president. What you might not know is that his father founded this club along with me, Tank and Dutch. He was like

a father figure to all of us, he knew that if it wasn't for the military or other good influences, then people like me would slip through the cracks and end up a statistic. Same with a lot of veterans, he'd seen many a good man medically discharged and lose their way. The Savage Legion MC was formed to give us, and men like us, a sense of purpose once we left the military. Not every member is a veteran, but many are. His name was Claw and he took me in when I didn't have anyone. I've been here ever since."

"Literally, here?" she asks.

I nod, fighting back a smile, I guess it sounded strange, but maybe I needed the camaraderie. I'd gone from a group home to college, and then to the military. Some might say I was institutionalized, but I didn't see it that way. I have no family—my club brothers are my family. "Yes, well once Claw had found a decent premises. You have to understand for a single man like myself, up until now, this club has provided everything I need. Over the years I've created a comfortable living space for myself. The prospects take care of the cooking and cleaning. They're also responsible for guarding the clubhouse. Someone has to step up, teach them the ropes and monitor to make sure everything's done correctly. I guess you can say that although my career as a chaplain ended, I never gave up the pastoral side of things." I pause wondering if I should tell her why exactly the Marines ended my chaplaincy. But I decide even though I don't want to sugarcoat things, if I want this woman to like me, there are some things best left for another time. "So I'm always here if any of the brothers have any problems, plus in addition to being the club chaplain and road captain I also handle the day-to-day running of the clubhouse, or at least delegating the work. I run a very tight ship. You could say this club is my whole life."

Mattie is paying close attention, hanging on my every word. When finish explaining, she asks another question. One I'm not expecting. "You said up until now this clubhouse had everything that you as a single man could need. What changed? What is it you need that the clubhouse no longer provides?"

I lay my fork down across the top of my plate and ran my hands down the front of my thighs. I could feel the roughness of my pants rub against my palms, centering me for this conversation I do not want to have. “Well now Miss Mattie, you’ve kind of put me on the spot here.”

“Being mysterious is only making me more curious,” she quips.

Well, it’s do or die time, so I decide to put myself out there. “As you might already know, our club, like most MCs, has women who hang around. We call them club girls. We tried calling them vixens, but it didn’t take off.” I left out the part that we used to call them club whores—the term might have been disrespectful, but we always treated our club women well.

Mattie looks around, presumably to make sure no one was listening to our conversation. “Yeah, I noticed they’re all pretty young. Do they make you feel awkward, what with you being a man of the cloth?”

I snort a laugh, thinking it couldn’t be further from the truth. Or at least it was until recently. “Nope. Not at all.” I hold back from telling her that my cock is golden, and the club girls fight over who gets to ride it. Instead, I try to put it diplomatically. “I’m not a man of the cloth. Well I was, but I’m not anymore. Anyway, I kind of lost interest in the whole meaningless sex thing. That’s not what I’m interested in at this stage of my life, after seeing my club brothers find partners, I realized that I need more. I want a long-term relationship involving mutual love, trust, and respect. I’d love to have a family and kids one day.”

At this point, her mouth is hanging open, so I quickly shut up before I go and tell her that it was her who brought about this change.

“Oh, wow. That was really honest and straightforward response. When you meet the right woman, you should explain it just like that.”

I picked up my coffee cup and murmured, “I think I just did,” before taking a drink of the warm morning brew.



It took her a second and then her eyes got round. “What now? Say that again,” she stammers.

My poor Mattie looks a bit frazzled by my bold words. It leaves me feeling as though perhaps I have been a bit premature in bringing it up so soon. Or mistaken, because what was the fuck am I thinking of? Why would a sweet young woman like Mattie want a grizzled old preacher who has nothing to offer her and lived in a biker clubhouse? I take a deep breath, I’ve opened this embarrassing can of worms so I may as well let them loose.

“I said that I’m looking to settle down with the right woman at some point in the future and I’m thinking there is a possibility that person might turn out to be you.” I grab my fork and shovel another bite of eggs into my mouth.

Her eyes open wide, and she looks about as shocked as if I’d suddenly stripped off and cartwheeled across the patio. “Me? You must have made some mistake. My life’s a hot mess. I’ve got MS. I’m the world’s worst workaholic. The local syndicate apparently has their heart set on dealing me a gruesome death in the not-too-distant future and I came here prepared to live off snacks out of my duffle bag. I don’t think I’m someone you should be thinking of settling down with.”

I waved my fork in a tight circle while pointing in her direction. “If you’re trying to talk me out of wanting to get to know you better, you’re doing just the opposite. Just thought you might want to know that.”

“Dude,” she huffs. “You have totally lost your marbles.”

“Maybe, but I don’t think so.” Pointing my fork at her plate, I added, “You should eat. Your food is getting cold.”

She grabs a piece of bacon and crams the whole thing in her mouth at once. She shakes her head in disbelief as she chews. I realize as I muse over her words that all her reasons for us not being together all related to what she felt were her weaknesses. At no time did she say that she isn’t interested in a worn-out old biker. Though it might just be her being nice and not wanting to hurt my feelings.

The next thing I know Siege comes storming into the room and makes a beeline for us. “What’s this I hear about the syndicate threatening Mattie?”

“I see you got the little gift box I asked the prospects to deliver.” I’d stuffed the threatening letters and assorted items in a box and had the prospects leave it for him.

Siege gapes at me. “I sure the fuck did. There was some messed up shit. Tank, Dutch, and I looked through it and we’re pretty convinced it wasn’t all created by the same person.”

“Yeah, that was my opinion as well.”

“Look, I’m not trying to be a dick,” Siege warns. “But Mattie can’t go back to her apartment without a protector?”

Mattie waves away his concerns with one hand. “Don’t worry. I’m not going back there anytime soon. I brought five suitcases so I can live in Rigs’ suite. He may or may not be there, but I brought all my gear. We’re gonna work on the missing kids cases together and may or may not end up falling in love—if he can get over the fact that I’m a hot mess and I can get over the fact that he is clearly deranged.”

By this point Siege is looking at her like she just grew two heads, not that Mattie notices. She just shoots me a grin and asks, “Did I miss anything or does that about cover it?”

“You missed the part about how no one’s going to tell you what to you and you’re going to continue being a workaholic.”

“Thanks for the reminder. You get extra bonus points for paying attention to the words coming out of my mouth, but you’ve still lost your marbles.”

Siege eases back out of his seat and whispers, “Rigs, can I talk to you for just a second in my office?”

I grab my coffee and tell Mattie, “I’ll be right back. You’ll probably be able to digest your food a lot better if I’m not here throwing you one curveball after another.”

“Oh no, don’t stop now. I’m starting to get addicted to the curveballs.”

I grin at her and follow Siege to his office. As I walk through the clubhouse, I jerk my chin at Tank and Dutch to join us. The second the door shut behind us, Siege screeches, “What in the fucking hell have you done to Mattie? What’s that nonsense about her living with you? Fuck’s sake, I can’t leave you alone with a woman for more than five minutes without you pulling some weird shit.”

I frown at him. “So overreaction is what we’re going with. If so, that’s fine. I’ll run with it.”

Dutch walks over to us, concern etched over his face. “I thought you liked Mattie. I wouldn’t have given you her number if I thought you were going to be disrespectful.”

“I wasn’t being disrespectful,” I look at Siege, “What she said, it wasn’t like that. She was just making a joke about something I’d said earlier.”

He just glares at me, I guess our club president is having a sense of humor bypass today. Though given what I found at Mattie’s it’s not surprising. “Look, I found out the syndicate was targeting her and brought her here.”

Siege sighs. “Did she really bring five suitcases?”

I nod and take another sip of my coffee before answering. “Yes. And a duffle bag full of snacks because she didn’t realize we had a functional kitchen and I guess she thought she was coming to live in a frat house.”

This is the point Tank joins the conversation. “Alright, none of this makes any sense. We got the box of stuff you left, want to tell us what happened?”

I walk them through our conversation from the night before with me arriving at hers to find the damaged Mattie doll hanging off her doorknob, and finish up telling them how I pretty much propositioned her over breakfast.

My club brothers look more bewildered than annoyed at this point. Siege runs his hand through his hair in a gesture that can only be described as exasperation. “You’re really interested in Mattie?”

“Why wouldn’t I be?” I can hear the irritation in my own voice when I speak.

Siege says, “Calm the fuck down, Rigs. I’m not disapproving or trying to talk you out of it. I’m just clarifying the situation. So what you’re saying is you’re going to take full responsibility for protecting her and see that all her needs are met? Is that what I’m hearing you say?”

“Yes. Mattie told you that herself if I recall.”

Siege grumbles. “Sorry, Rigs, I think I got up on the wrong side of the bed today. Now, I have to go home and tell Cleo what’s happening. She’s not happy her best friend is being threatened by the syndicate and didn’t tell her. But at least I can reassure her that Mattie’s going to be looked after here.”

Dutch speaks up, “It’s a good damn thing that you got involved when you did. It doesn’t sound like Mattie understood the danger she was in.”

“I hate to think what might have happened, if you hadn’t found that warning hanging on her door.” Tank agrees.

Dutch reaches out, grabs my shoulder and states emphatically, “She would have wound up dead. That’s what would have happened. I’m glad you set your insecurities aside and called her last night, brother.”

“Me too,” I reply dryly. Taking my friend’s sage advice when my head was all turned around was the best decision I ever made. God knows, I would have been eaten up with guilt if they’d gotten to her while I was angsty about my worthiness to be her protector. “I’m going to go back and finish breakfast with Mattie, and then we’re going to get set up in my office. If anyone needs me, just pop in or shoot me a text.”

“Got it,” Siege says weakly. I guess he’s still wondering how he’s going to explain all this to Cleo, because I doubt Mattie told her everything.

I can hear them muttering as I walk out the door. I don’t mind. I’ve given them a lot to process at one time. But I know I’m making the right decision with Mattie and I’m not going to

let anyone dissuade me from helping her find these missing kids or trying to make her mine.

When I approach the table, I can see she hasn't eaten a bite since I left. Instead, she's staring blankly at the wall, likely pondering the life choices that brought her to my notice.

I slide into my chair and pour myself some more coffee from the still warm carafe. "Miss Mattie, you should eat. You're under a lot of stress and need to keep your strength up."

Her hand comes out to pick up another piece of crunchy bacon and she takes a bite off the end and then uses it to point to me. "Tell me something and be honest. Do you think I'm the weak link in the chain?"

I freeze in place for a second before responding. "What? Why would you think something like that?"

"You know how sometime gullible people don't understand the predator, prey relationship. Unlike animals who seem to instinctually know what animals and situations to stay away from, people don't have that. It's probably because it's been thousands of years since most of us have had to flee from natural predators. So, it stands to reason that instinct for survival might be dulled."

Now it's my turn to be absolutely bewildered. "I'm not sure exactly where you're going with the train of thought, Miss Mattie. It's best if you just keep talking, until I can grasp your point."

She lays her bacon down on her plate and continues. "There are a couple of things I don't understand. Like how there can be so many human predators moving among us, but so few of the people they're targeting can pick up on the fact that they're about to be preyed upon."

I still don't know what she's trying to say, but I think I get the drift of it, "Beware of false prophets which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves."

Her expression morphs into one of surprise. "Yes, I guess it is something like that. These people disguising themselves in

plain sight. After everything that's happened, I can't help but look at my work colleagues and wonder, 'is it you?'"

I make an 'eat' motion, because if I'm going to be her protector then I need to make sure she keeps healthy, and that includes eating.

She takes a bite, and then continues, "At first I thought they were just trying to scare me away from investigating the missing children. But the more I thought about the situation, the more I wondered if the goal wasn't just to scare me away from something, but to terrify me into submission so they could turn me into one for their minions like they did with my predecessor. Do you think they picked me because I'm now a supervisor or because they think I'm the weak link in the chain? Like they think my disability makes me an easy target."

After giving her question some thought, I answer, "I think it could be a bit of both, maybe they're underestimating you, and think you're an easy target. They don't realize you're far too intelligent and capable to be exploited."

She mumbles, "I hope you're right about that."

"The people running the syndicate are pretty damn smart, but they seriously underestimate their opponents. They thought they were untouchable until the Savage Legion MC started picking off their members and learning more about their organization. Maybe they thought with time you'd either hand in your notice and give up the search for those kids, or that they could wear you down and get you on their payroll."

Her shoulders relax. "I shouldn't let them get in my head and make me doubt myself."

"To doubt is human. We all doubt ourselves at times because self-doubt leads to much needed self-reflection. Without that we would all grow needlessly vain, self-important, and arrogant."

A soft smile slides onto her face. "You always know just what to say. How do you even do that?"

I smother back a smile of my own. "Normally, when I talk people's eyes glaze over. They think I'm a boring washed-up

preacher.”

She picked up her fork and poked at her food. “I’m sure that’s not true. While you were gone, some woman named Lori warned me not to get too attached to you because you were spoken for. Boring men don’t have pretty young women fighting over him.”

“I’m sorry if she bothered you. I’ll have a word with her.”

“It’s okay. I already told her we were getting to know each other and if she didn’t like that it was too bad. Guess what? She didn’t like that and there were words. Like I said, pretty young women are fighting over you, maybe you need to focus your attention on them if you want to wife someone up.”

I burst out laughing. “I can’t tell if you’re being serious sometimes, Miss Mattie. You want me to haul my ass over to those club girls and quit bothering you?”

“Oh no, you don’t get to hit on me and then change your mind. We’re getting to know each other. It might lead to friendship instead of romance but by God, we’re doing this.”

Looking down at my place to keep from blushing, I murmur, “You shouldn’t take the lord’s name in vain.”

“I’ll try to remember that,” she says happily. When she digs into her breakfast with gusto, the knot in my chest finally begins to loosen. This has been a supremely stressful morning for both of us.

Truth be told, a happy Mattie is worlds better than a shocked, frightened one, but the fact that she insists upon getting to know me is what makes my heart sing with happiness. The more I talk with her, the more I genuinely like her. Being her friend would be a blessing but being her husband would constitute a miracle.

## Chapter 6

### *Mattie*

**W**e spent the next six hours sorting case records, pinning up clues on the huge bulletin board covering one wall and discussing which cases to focus on first. Before, I was just taking a scattershot approach by scraping up information on all of them and scrambling for any lead I could find but after talking to Rigs I realize how counterproductive that approach was.

For the first time, I'm beginning to think this whole situation was finally moving in the right direction. And it was all thanks to Rigs, the minister with a heart of gold, and a head for getting things done.

Thankfully, he's not said any more about wanting to us to get to know each other to see if romance sparks. When he told me he was interested in my heart almost burst, considering I've been harboring a crush on him since almost the very first moment we met. But then reality hit, and I realized it would never work. I swore off men a long time ago after having three serious boyfriends in a row who turned out to be total asshats.

The first moved in with me, then promptly quit his job expecting me to take care of him, I cut him loose after eight months of that nonsense. The second, volunteered me to watch his niece and nephew on the weekends while he went out with his buddies and that got old super-fast. The third left me not long after I got diagnosed with MS, telling me he didn't want to date a cripple.

I had a few years where I didn't date at all, the MS diagnosis at twenty-five years of age had been a shock, and I guess it took me a while to get my head around it. Though once I started dating again, I realized just what idiots men could be. I'd had those with a fetish for disabled women, ones who wanted to treat me like a helpless baby and ones who were plain embarrassed to be seen with a woman who used



crutches in public. So thanks, but no thanks. While I didn't think that Rigs would fit in any of those categories it was better to keep him at arm's length and dream.

Though compared to those past disasters, Rigs was a different beast all together, and working with him today had been pleasant. We bounced ideas of each other, and he listened when I made any suggestions. Really listened, which I appreciated.

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It was late in the afternoon when Cleo comes barging into the room, looking frazzled and upset. "Mattie, we need to talk," she blurts out unceremoniously.

Rigs gets up from his desk, locks the file he'd been looking at in the file cabinet and politely excuses himself.

"That was a little rude," I point out. "You didn't even say hello to Rigs when you busted into his office."

She stood there with her hands on her hips for a brief second before saying, "I don't even know who you are anymore."

I lean back in my chair and fold my hands over my stomach and look at her. "Just spit it out, Cleo. Tell me what's got you so upset."

She fast-walks up to my desk, grabs a chair and drags it along behind her. She shoves it next to my desk and drops down into it before speaking. "Siege told me all about how the syndicate has been leaving those threats at your place, for fucking months! This morning you told me it was just the one silly doll. Why wouldn't you tell us about something like that? Do you have any idea how it would it felt if you turned up dead, and we found out that you knew all along they were targeting you. We can't protect you if we don't know what's going on."

I sigh. "Yeah, pretty everyone here has been saying the same thing to me since I first stepped foot in the clubhouse."

"Mattie. I love you like a sister. We just spoke on the phone last night and you didn't say a damn thing about receiving

threats for months.”

I shrug. “I didn’t want to worry you, you had enough on your plate with the twins. Plus, they were just idle threats. If they really wanted me dead, they had a million opportunities over the last year to make that happen.”

Cleo takes a couple of deep breaths, and I can tell she’s trying to calm herself down.

I state soothingly, “Look, I’m an intelligent person. You know if I’d felt those threats were real, I would have told you. You know I don’t have a death wish, I can’t save any kids if I wind up dead.”

“Threats that are escalating,” she says.

“And that’s why I’m here taking an all-expenses paid vacation at the Savage Legion Clubhouse. I might visit the spa later on for a mani-pedi.”

“Mattie, this situation is nothing to joke about. I’m really worried for you.”

“Well, who the hell isn’t? First there was Rigs losing his mind because he found one of the syndicates crappy little warnings hanging off my front door. When Siege found out he early lost his shit as well. Even if I am underestimating the danger, every damn body else here is overestimating it.”

“Well, I’m glad they’re looking out for you. We both know what the syndicate can do, and how vindictive they can be, especially after we’ve worked so hard to put them behind bars.”

“That’s the part I don’t understand,” I say. “Savage Legion MC are the ones who prove the biggest threat to the syndicate, so why are they targeting me and not the club?”

“I wondered too, Siege thinks it might be because the club has closed ranks around him and myself, plus the other members who live off site. We’re all extra careful because of the kids. There’s literally no way they can get to us, so we think you are their secondary target because of the position you hold at CPS and also because they know you’re linked to the MC through me.”

“Well, I don’t think you have to worry about anything happening to me moving forward. Rigs made me pack my bags and move into his suite here at the clubhouse. I’m not allowed to go anywhere without an armed escort.”

“I remember those days from whenever I first got targeted by them. I felt like all my personal freedom had suddenly evaporated, like I was living under martial law. It was pretty awful, so I understand how hard this must be for you.”

“Living here was the last thing I ever thought would happen when I woke up this morning.”

“If the accommodation is bad let me know, and I’ll talk to Siege. I’m sure he’ll work something out.”

“To be honest, Rigs took me to his suite to have lunch a couple of hours ago. He’s got his own little apartment here because I think he’s the only one who lives at the clubhouse full-time. Other than the lack of cooking facilities it’s actually much nicer than my own apartment so you won’t get any complaints from me in that area.”

“If you like, I can talk to Siege about you moving in with us.”

“Look Cleo, I know Siege is shit hot when it comes to security around your house, but I feel like if I came to stay with you, it might draw more attention from the syndicate. It’s likely they’ve already looked at whatever setup you’ve got and decided that penetrating it is more trouble than it’s worth. But if you keep adding high value targets that might change. The safety of your kids has to come before the safety of your friend.”

“Oh Mattie, don’t say that.”

“But it’s true. I’ll be fine here.”

“Are you sure about this?”

“Yes. Now that I’ve spent some time around Rigs, I’m feeling worlds more comfortable with this situation. Trust me this will be for the best.”

“It wouldn’t have anything to do with you getting to spend more time around that hot preacher? Siege told me about what he said.”

I laugh, “Rigs was just joking. I don’t think he would see me as potential girlfriend material.”

Cleo stares at me and raises her eyebrow.

I ignore the quizzical look, I know what she said the other night, and I know what Rigs said but I still think once he gets to know me, he’ll decide he doesn’t want to date a woman with my problems.

“Are you taking a leave of absence from work?” Cleo asks.

“Hell no. I’ve already made it very clear that my professional life will be business as usual.”

“I’ll be with you at work. As long as we stick together, I think everything will be okay.”

“From your lips to God’s ear, my friend.”

Cleo gestures around the room with one hand. “It looks like you’ve got a nice set up going here.”

“I know originally Rigs just offered me use of his office, but staying at the clubhouse might turn out to be a blessing in disguise. I want all my case information on the missing kids to be within easy reach. For months I’ve been spending evenings and weekends trying to make sense of all the information, and for the first time I feel like I’m finally making progress. I wouldn’t give that up for love or money.”

“I’m hearing you loud and clear on that. I’ve got time on my hands right now, would you like for me to help you organize some of your case information.”

“The more eyes and ears on this situation the better as far as I’m concerned.” I know my friend feels bad because she’s not been able to help me as much lately, but I totally understand, with two sets of twins in the house her life is chaotic enough.

“Good,” Cleo says as she wanders over to look at the bulletin board. “Maybe while we’re working you can tell me more about what’s going on between you and Rigs.”

I get up and start pulling files out of a box. “I already told you he offered me a secure office for my files and volunteered to help find these missing kids.”

She grabs a stack of files and spreads them out on the table. “Don’t avoid the subject, I know you too well. Spill, I heard what Siege told me, now I want it from the horse’s mouth.”

I roll my eyes. “Is nothing sacred around this place?”

Cleo chuckles, “You should know there are no secrets here. There’s not one single thing going down in this clubhouse that every single one of them doesn’t know about. And I don’t know whether or not you know this, but Rigs holds the dubious distinction of being the very first brother to ever join the Savage Legion MC. Both Tank and Dutch joined shortly thereafter.”

“Rigs never mentioned that. He said he was one of the founders of the club and left it at that.”

“Yep, Siege’s dad took him under his wing when he was a troubled teen. I think that was when the idea for the club first started. Siege was only a kid then, Rigs is almost ten years older than him, so he’s like an older brother or a cool uncle,” she pauses and laughs. “Well, that’s if your cool uncle was preacher with slightly unconventional thoughts about religion. They all look up to him I guess, so Rigs setting his sights on a woman after all these years is gonna be the talk of this clubhouse. Mel already asked about you.”

“You mean, Mel, the bartender?”

Cleo nodded. She called to solicit information on your favorite foods and drinks as well as your choice in music. I’d say they’re planning on rolling out the red carpet for you here.”

“Not all of them. I’ve already had one of the women approach and pretty much tell me to stay away from Rigs. She said he was spoken for already.”

“You don’t even have to tell me who said that because I already know. It was Lori. I know that because all the club girls have their favorites when it comes to the brothers. Rigs

has always been Lori's favorite. I could always tell because she was really sweet toward him, brought him coffee and tried to get with him at night."

"Oh, wow I didn't know it was like that."

"It was just like that. I think it was one sided though. Rigs has always been polite to the women here, but I've never seen him show any favoritism toward any of them."

"I do have a question to ask you if you don't mind."

"Ask away. If I have the answer, you know I'll give it to you, bestie."

I shoot her a grin and ask my question. "All the brothers here have nicknames, right?"

"They call them club names rather than nicknames but yes, they do. Sometimes it's an old nickname, sometimes it's based on an attribute. It's all meant to be in good fun, no one has a name with any negative connotations."

"Do you know what any of the club names mean?"

"Yes. Siege was given his club name by his father, Claw. He was the club president who founded the Savage Legion. Apparently, my husband had a tendency to lay siege to the things he wanted in life. That's why his father chose that name for him. Tank was given his club name because he used to be a tank operator when he was in the military, admittedly that one wasn't very imaginative."

"What about Rigs? Why was he tagged with that club name?"

"Because the man is an absolute savant when it comes to fixing things, a real MacGyver. His club brothers swear he can fix any broken thing temporarily with a lot of bubble gum, a toothpick, and six inches of bailing wire."

"He's a Mr. Fix it, in other words."

Cleo nods knowingly. "I've seen him fix some really messed up things with my own eyes. Everything from the beer draft dispenser to an electric socket that stopped working. That's kind of nifty to watch."

“I’ll have to keep my eyes open and see if I can witness some of the magic.”

“And I’m going to keep my fingers crossed that the two of you end up working some magic of your own, he’s a good man.”

“Stranger things have happened.” I murmur as I get back to work on one of the boxes.

It’s exciting to think that we might get a break and be able to rescue another of the missing kids. We just have to keep pecking away at it until we get them all back home to safety.

## Chapter 7

### *Rigs*

Having Mattie at the clubhouse all day has been wonderful and seeing how dedicated she is to finding those kids warms my heart. Nothing seems to slow her down. It's pretty awe inspiring to watch her in action, and I can't seem to take my eyes off her. She told me that when she got diagnosed with MS in her mid-twenties, she thought her life was over. She hadn't known much about the condition then, and I guess getting a diagnosis like that out of the blue would throw anyone off track. It's the relapsing-remitting type which means she has flare-ups and then returns to baseline, unlike Siege's mom who has the progressive form of the condition. She's on a bunch of meds to control the symptoms and she said as long as she takes good care of herself, then other than when she's having a flare-up, she does okay.

Tonight we stay up late organizing the last of her files, I'm tempted to tell her to take it easy but then I remember what she'd said about people trying to look after her or treat her like an invalid. She's a grown woman, if she's tired then she'll tell me. When we're finally done, we have a stack of thirteen pictures. Mattie spreads them out on the table between us. I lean over and look into their innocent faces. Of the missing children in the files, these are the ones we might have enough information on to actually locate.

"What do you think we should focus on finding first?" Mattie asks.

I rub my chin as I think over her question. "Can we arrange them in order of the dates they went missing?"

"Yes," she responds eagerly. "I wrote basic information on each child on the back of their picture."

I watch as she flips each of the photos over to check the dates they went missing and then organizes them all in a line



down the center of the table. “This is Jennifer Williams. She went missing little over six years ago.”

I listen as she goes down the line telling me each child’s name and the date they went missing. Placing her finger on the edge of the last photograph, she says, “This is Evan White. He went missing from state care seven months ago.”

When I bend over to look at the picture, I see right away there’s something different about him. He’s much older than the other kids. All the rest look to be between five and ten years old, Evan is clearly a teen. Mattie had said earlier that she’d been trying to find the kids who’d been gone the longest, while I can see why she did that I wonder if we can try it a different way.

“I think we should start with the last kid that went missing. It might be easier to pick up the trail of someone who just recently went missing.”

She nods thoughtfully, “I guess I couldn’t stop thinking about those poor kids who’ve been gone for years. Every extra day must seem like a lifetime. But you’re right, maybe starting with the most recent might give us a lead.”

I push his photo toward her, “Tell me everything you know about Evan.”

She picks up Evan’s picture and begins reading information from the back. “Evan White is fourteen years old. As you can see from his photo he has black hair, brown eyes, and a slight build.” After a thoughtful pause, she says, “I don’t remember this kid, his case supervisor was Margo Cummings, she’s retired now. His last foster placement failed. The foster parents reported they could no longer handle him, because of his aggression and moodiness”.

“Poor kid, you think he was acting out because of something that happened in the home or before he got there?”

She shrugs, and I can see she looks tired.

“I think we’ve gotten a lot done in one day. It’s getting late and you’ve got work early in the morning, so maybe we should call it a night. While you’re at work tomorrow I’ll read

through the case information you've accumulated on Evan and see if I can come up with any ideas. If you're up to working on this some more tomorrow evening, we can pick up where we left off." I know I had resolved not to fuss over her, but this had nothing to do with her MS. We really had done a lot of work and had been on the go since breakfast.

Mattie stretches her arms above her head and yawns. "I didn't realize how tired I was getting until you mentioned calling it a night."

I scoop up the pictures and lock them away in the filing cabinet. We head to my suite, making small talk along the way. Despite her tiredness, Mattie is absurdly impressed with our building, saying it's much bigger on the inside than it looked from the outside.

"That's because we have a full basement plus a sizable attic that's been converted into living accommodation. When Claw first found this building, it was a disused fire station. The part where the vehicles were kept became our auto repair garage, which was initially the main business we had. There were obviously some rooms for the on-shift firefighters, so it didn't take much work to turn them into self-contained suites. Over the years we built into the attic space and the basement, plus an extension for the bar area."

"Are you the only one who lives here full time?" Mattie asks.

"The only patched in brother, Dutch lived here until a few months ago, now he's with Joy. Over the years other brothers have stayed here on and off. But now it's just me and the prospects."

"If you don't mind me asking how many brothers are in the Savage Legion? There always seems to be people coming and going whenever I've been here."

"Our club was splintered a few years ago. We lost about half our members at that time, some were killed, and some joined the Hellfire Hounds MC. As it stands now, eighteen patched members including myself and nine prospects."

I unlock my suite and hold the door open for Mattie.

“I don’t know if I mentioned this during lunch, but you have a very nice apartment. The aesthetic it’s very clean and uncluttered,” Mattie comments as she sits down on the sofa in my main room.

I sit in my favorite armchair across from her and look around the room trying to see it with her eyes. “I’m not the kind of man who has a lot of sentimental attachment to possessions other than books. My attachments are to this club and the people in my life that I care about. How about yourself, Miss Mattie, do you collect anything in particular?”

“Not really. My apartment is too small to hoard a bunch of useless items. I’ve always been more focused on my job and as the hours are often long, home is more the place I sleep.”

“Surely, you have some small pleasures in life?” I ask curiously.

“I like to dine out occasionally, catch a movie or play, sometimes go swimming, and before I realized kids were going missing in our area, I used to enjoy trivia night at our local pub. Cleo and I used to go every week. It was our guilty pleasure I guess you could say. What about yourself, Rigs? Do you have hobbies outside the club?”

“I’m a man of simple pleasures, I enjoy riding my motorcycle on long road trips, checking out the scenery and reading, particularly books on spirituality and philosophy.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever known a biker minister,” Mattie states quietly.

“Like I said before, I don’t consider myself a minister or even a believer in organized religion these days. I still believe, but...” I trail off wondering whether she wants to hear the full story of how I turned my back on the church. I guess she doesn’t, so I steer the topic away. “I am a state licensed wedding officiant though so I can perform marriages and such. But here, when my club brothers come to me with their problems, I don’t respond from a place of religious teachings so much as from a place of compassion. I just walk them

through the steps of finding a solution to life's problems they can live with. I want them to be able to be proud of the man they see in the mirror every morning."

"If you don't mind me asking, what made you turn away from organized religion. What happened? Actually, forget that, how did you get into it in the first place?"

Mattie's questions brings back all the disillusionment I felt as a chaplain in the Marines. But as she's asking, I decide to answer her question as honestly as possible. "I told you how Claw took me under his wing after my mother died. At the time I had no other family and was living in a group home. I was out of control then, fourteen years old and already acting out. You want to know how I met Claw? I actually tried to steal his Harley." I laugh thinking back to how stupid I was then, I didn't even know how to ride, but I thought I could try and sell it to someone. "Anyway, rather than kick my butt which is what I deserved, he decided to make it his personal mission to get me straightened out. Between him and the minister at my church, within a few years I could ride like a pro, and also, I'd decided on my future. So, I went to theology college and eventually became a Marine chaplain."

"What about the MC, you said that you'd formed it with Siege's dad, was this before or after you became a minister?" Mattie asks, I realize she's actually interested in learning about me.

"Claw had a strong sense of community—he also knew there were many men he served with who lost their way once they were discharged. The military gives you a sense of belonging and it was on a ride one day when he was on leave, that he told me about his dreams of starting a motorcycle club. Something he could focus on when he left the military. At the time he was in his early thirties and had young kids—Siege and his sister. He had a year left before he could leave, and he'd decided that he didn't want to be a career soldier, so I guess that's when the Savage Legion MC was born. He served with Tank and Dutch and all four of us banded together."

"What did Claw think about you becoming a chaplain? I don't mean to make assumptions but that doesn't seem like

something that would mesh well with a biker lifestyle.”

“We’re not a one percent club, some bikers are outlaws, but the Legion was started as a way to help those in need. Rudderless teens like me, or jaded veterans. Anyone who craved family and brotherhood. He knew that my faith was important to me, and he saw that it helped.”

Talking about those early times makes me anxious as hell. I get up and walk across the room to pour myself a whiskey. “You want one?”

Mattie nods in agreement. Handing her the drink, she thanks me, and I begin pacing as I continue my life story.

“I actually enjoyed working as a chaplain, but things happened that got me disillusioned.” I pause, my mind going back to those days.

“Did something in particular happen or was it a slow realization that it wasn’t the career path for you?”

“I quickly came to realize what the soldiers I worked with needed was kindness and compassion, rather than pretty words about God’s love. A Marine who’s just seen his buddies killed by enemy fire, or had his legs blown off by an IED doesn’t want to hear that it’s all part of God’s plan for them.”

Mattie takes a mouthful of her whiskey and nods in understanding.

“There was one incident that was the decider. It’s what got me dishonorably discharged from the military and struck off as a minister.” I sit back down in my armchair and take a sip of my drink to ready myself.

“One night on base, this Marine asked if he could speak with me in private. He had something he wanted to get off his chest. I’m guessing he thought I was a priest or something and whatever he said was like a confession. He told me he’d been sleeping with his cousin who lived with his family, and he was worried about it. I know it’s legal in some states, but he was from Texas where it’s illegal. So I started giving him advice, saying he has to do what he thinks is right. Then he starts saying how it was all her fault, how she was coming onto him,

walking around half-naked. I was about to tell him that women have the right to dress how they want, but then he looks at me and says, ‘if she’s like that now, then how’s she gonna be once she’s in high school?’ She was only thirteen, for God’s sake! I lost it and started punching the fucker, I was still punching him when the Marine Corps Military Police pulled me off him.”

I stop talking and look at Mattie, her eyes are wide, “What happened?”

I summarize the rest of the story, “I got thrown into the cells, he ended up in an ICU for months. I was discharged from the military and my ministerial license was stripped. I escaped criminal charges, because no judge is going to convict a man for beating a pedophile bastard to a bloody pulp.”

“What happened to the Marine?” Mattie asks.

“He’s doing twenty years, so as far as I’m concerned it was worth it.”

“That’s quite a story of self-discovery and determination. You should consider writing a book about your life from teenage tearaway to respected minister.”

I snort a laugh, “And then to middle-aged tearaway. I’m not entirely certain my hard-won lessons would be all that interesting to anyone else. They would likely see me as a washed up has-been who turned my back on God’s teachings.” Taking another sip of my drink, I take a moment to organize my thoughts. “What about you Miss Mattie? Are you part of one of the local flocks?”

She starts shaking her head almost before I finished asking the question. I guess I’ve hit a sore spot. “No way. I try to be a decent person, but I have never felt a need to incorporate organized religion into my life. My parents went to church and took me with them when I was a child. I wouldn’t call them devout by any stretch of the imagination. It was more that they went to church because that’s what they were taught to do themselves growing up. When I was a teenager, I started filling my weekends with friends, study groups and swimming. I decided to stop attending church with them when

I was a teenager, and they didn't bug me about it. After that I just really never gave it any more thought."

"Working as a supervisor for Child Protective Services have you learned to be suspicious of religious leaders?"

"No, not particularly. We don't see an increased level of predation among members of the clergy. It happens in exactly the same percentages as the general population. It's just more shocking because you expect better of religious leaders. I am continually disappointed that many churches rug sweep problems instead of reporting them to the authorities."

"I think we hold people like that to a higher standard, and so we should. People in a position of authority—be they religious figures, law enforcement officers, military commanders and other people that are supposed to be operating in roles of protectors. They all signed up and swore an oath to protect people from predators and evildoers. So, when it's them who are the perpetrators, it's an unforgivable breach of trust."

"I suppose there's a dark side when it comes to supporting people in need. That's always been the hardest part for me, learning things I never wanted to know about how depraved people can be to one another. Sometimes I wish I could take a pill and forget it, but that's part of the job that we can never turn away from."

A short silence spins out between the two of us and I wonder how our conversation turned so dark. It seems tactless to change the subject, but I feel like I should say something to lighten the mood because neither of us wants to fall asleep with this on our mind.

"Do you still like to swim? If so, maybe that's something we can do as a stress reliever."

"I do still enjoy a good swim and it's something that my physical therapist recommends. Though with the stress of the past few months and the search for these missing kids I haven't swum in a while. Nothing else matters to me right now."

“I agree that should be our top priority. However, if we don’t take care of ourselves, we’ll eventually burn out and not be much use to anyone else. I try to go swimming three times a week, while riding is my favorite way to relax, hunching over the handlebars and hugging tight curves can sometimes play havoc on my back and it’s a great way to unwind. One of our club brothers has a private pool and he’s generous enough to allow us to use it whenever we like.”

“I would definitely love to join you some day.”

“Well, if you’re not too tired after you finish at the office tomorrow, maybe I can pick you up from work, and we could get in a swim before diving into this case?”

Mattie nods her agreement, “It would be nice to start with a clear head. I’ve looked at those files so many times and just couldn’t manage to piece together any clues. At this point I’m willing to give anything a try.”

“That’s great. Did you pack a swimsuit? If not, I can get one of the prospects to buy one tomorrow.”

Mattie laughs, “It really is like a spa break. No, I didn’t pack one so if they could do that it would be great. I’ll sort out the cash tomorrow morning.”

“No need Miss Mattie, I told you the Savage Legion Spa Retreat is all inclusive, we’ll provide anything you need. I can put it in the storage compartment on my bike when I pick you back up in the afternoon.”

“I’ve never ridden on the back of a bike before.”

I realize in my excitement I’ve totally forgotten about her disability. Could she hold on okay, and what about her crutches? “If you’d rather not chance it, I can grab one of our club vans like we used earlier today to haul all your stuff to the clubhouse.”

Mattie looks pensive. “I’m always up for trying something new, I’m not needing the forearm crutches at the moment, I brought them with me just in case—I think I should be okay on a bike.”



“I’ll take it slow and if you don’t feel safe when I drive you to work in the morning, I can always bring one of the vans to pick you up.”

“That sounds fair,” then she raises an eyebrow at me. “So are you still thinking of romancing it up with me, or was that a fleeting thought?”

I can’t keep the smile off my face. “Maybe this is all part of my plan. I think right now I’m in the more-interested-than-ever category.”

“I’m sorry about all the panicking over breakfast. I just wasn’t expecting that particular curveball.”

I decide to give this beautiful woman fair warning of what she’s getting herself into by giving me a chance. “I want you to know that although I might not technically be considered a good man, I’ll always be good to you.”

“That’s pretty cryptic, Rigs. You want to explain that in a little better detail?”

I drain the rest of my drink from my glass and get to my feet. “Perhaps when we know each other a little better I can tell you all my deepest darkest secrets. But right now, we’re not there yet, so I think I’ll hang on to my privacy a little longer.”

Mattie rises to her feet as well. “I get the feeling that you’re a complex man. I like your personality, but I think every human being has a dark side. It all comes down to how often you feed it. I intentionally don’t feed mine to keep the darkness at bay. I suggest you do the same thing because in our line of work, that darkness that’s always lurking on the edges of our consciousness can easily swallow us whole if we turn our back on it for just a minute.”

Shock roils through my gut because she’s not wrong. There have been many times over the years when I believed the darkness around me was seeping into my very core. “I’ll remember that, Miss Mattie. Are you ready to go to bed?”

“I am. But if you’re giving me your bed, where does that leave you?”

I gesture to the sofa she had been sitting on. “It’s comfortable enough that you shouldn’t worry about taking my bed.”

“Maybe we could trade off? She suggests.

“Or you could let me treat you like the guest of honor you are and sleep in the damn bed,” I laugh.

She smiles up at me. “Alright. If you change your mind about trading it off, let me know.”

When she heads to my room, pride surges in my chest that this beautiful woman who hadn’t rejected my advances out of hand, would now be snuggling up in my bed. I had changed up the sheets and made my room as nice as possible for her stay because I might be a rough old biker, but I wasn’t a total slob.

I sit on my sofa and stare at the half empty glass Mattie had drunk from. A slight smudge of her lipstick stained the rim. I smile at the thought of having more intimate conversations with her.

She had asked about my life and seemed genuinely interested in me. Most women just wanted to ride my cock and be done with it. Though from this moment forward, I would be saving it for Mattie. It didn’t matter if it took years for her to warm up to me, I’d wait. Mattie is my one. I can feel it all the way down to my bones.

## *Chapter 8*

### *Mattie*

I wake up in Rigs' bed, all warm and relaxed. I didn't even have a bad dream, which is rare for me. That's probably why I'm feeling like a million bucks this morning.

Mine and Cleo's investigation is finally taking off. Or I should say mine and Rigs' investigation while Cleo's is knee deep in diapers. The alarm on my phone goes off and I reach over to the bedside table to turn it off. I find that I'm reluctant to leave Rigs' comfortable bed. His room is sparsely decorated with huge motorcycle themed metal artwork on two of the walls. I don't know what I expected, crosses or something like that? But there is nothing with a religious theme decorating his room.

If I didn't know better, I would think he was just another badass biker. But I do know better. Out of all the brothers Cleo introduced me to, Rigs stood out. He was different from all the rest. Even though he was ripped and his biceps hard as rocks, he was less bulky than most of the other men in the club. Truth be told, I liked the look of him, the tone of his voice and the way he responded when Cleo introduced us. I was always used to admiring and not touching, needing and not getting. Imagine my surprise when he hit on me yesterday. If there hadn't been so many other things going on, I would have liked to have been able to lean into the moment and savor it a bit. I was still wary, considering my disastrous attempts at dating, but Rigs seems like a good man, a really good man.

Finally I drag myself out of bed and start getting ready for my day. After a nice warm shower. I can already smell coffee and bacon wafting under the door. Room service breakfast? It was enough to get me moving double quick and I dress and grab my purse.

When I come out of the bedroom, Rigs has a table set with breakfast. I waste no time taking a seat and enjoying his generosity once more. If there's one thing I will say about this man, it's that he knows how to treat a guest. We make polite small talk as we quickly eat and then go outside to get on his bike.

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Rigs motorcycle is something else. It's a huge Harley with a lot of chrome and leather seats. I can tell this man has spent a lot of time taking care of his bike. The chrome is gleaming under the morning sun.

"It's almost too pretty to sit on," I exclaim. "I'm afraid I might scratch it."

Rigs throws me a proud smile. "You won't. Trust me. My bike's tough like its owner."

Oh, there's that bad boy biker, hiding behind his smooth, easy-going demeanor. He helps me put on his spare helmet and then assists me onto his bike. He climbs on in front of me and revs his engine.

"Hold on tight, Miss Mattie."

I wrap my arms around his waist and hold on for dear life. When we take off, it's like magic. I can now totally understand why Cleo loves riding on the back of Siege's motorcycle. It's the best feeling in the whole. I rest my cheek against Rigs' back and just watch the scenery go by.

All too soon we arrive at my office. Rigs helps me off and packs the spare helmet in the storage compartment.

"Thanks for the ride. It was absolutely exhilarating," I say with a huge smile plastered on my face. My hair is probably flattened, and my cheeks reddened but it was the most fun I've had in ages.

His face lights up with pure happiness. "I'm glad to be able to share one of my favorite experiences with you."

I give him a little pat on the shoulder. "I'm looking forward to the ride home this evening."

When I turn to head into the office, I notice two other employees staring at me. I'm having a hard time working out whether they're jealous because I caught a ride with a hot biker, or they see my behavior as unbefitting of a manager. I don't really care what they think. I never have.

Once in my office and out of the way of judgmental eyes I start getting set up for my day. Cleo makes it to the office shortly after me, and we get to work. Our day is filled with scheduling home visits for the clients who have open cases and trying to decide which cases we should refer for possible removal. We try never to remove a child from the home unless they are truly in danger. Family separations are always traumatic for the child and for the parents.

In between tasks my mind drifts back to the gentlemen biker who has insisted on becoming my protector and helping me solve the case of these missing kids. He's clearly at least ten years older than me, but that doesn't mean he's not attractive. If I'm being honest, he's panty melting hot. My long-lost libido has come roaring back to life. I still can't decide if I want to end up in a full-blown relationship with Rigs or even if that's what he wants. I know he said that he wanted to settle down, but part of me wonders if that would be with someone like me. Once he gets to know me properly and sees me on the days when I am not so mobile, then maybe he'll change his mind. He seems like a nice man, and we have a lot in common, but I've sworn off men for a reason.

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I have a fresh file in front of me which makes my heart sink, it's on an employee who has been accused of dereliction of duty. She was working with a family where a child has been found to be neglected to the point of being in active danger. A neighbor called a few days ago to report that the boy was sitting on the front porch playing with a small power drill. I pushed a notification for the case worker to make an immediate home visit to assess the danger. Instead, she just called the mother and told her to remove the drill and then wrote up that the home visit revealed no danger. We now know that there was no home visit, because shortly after the call the

neighbor heard the mother beating her kid and called the police, who then arrested the mother and called CPS to pick the child up for placement. The Las Salinas police filed a complaint against the agency because the child was covered in bruises from prior abuse by the mother. So, now the whole agency is in hot water.

I dial her office and ask her to come to mine. I hate terminating staff, but in this situation, I don't see another choice.

Elaine Markus sticks her head around my door, "You wanted to see me?"

"Yes, please come in and take a seat. I need to talk to you about the Brady Clifford case."

Her shoulders slump. "Yeah, I really messed that one up. I heard his mother ended up getting herself arrested. I hope she didn't take her son on a drug run or anything like that."

"I read your report. Can you walk me through what happened verbally?"

"Sure. I got your push notification to make a home visit right away. I called the mom to intervene immediately because there was a power tool involved. When I got there, there weren't any tools out and Brady was playing a video game in the living room. I talked to the mother, and she said the neighbor spies on her all the time and called just to harass her. Since I didn't find evidence of wrongdoing, I didn't take further action."

"Which company vehicle did you take?"

The Altima. I always use that one if it's available. Why do you ask?"

"I looked at the travel log, and you didn't sign out that you took the car that day."

She shrugged. "I might have forgotten to sign the book."

"Well, the Altima was off the premises for the entire day. Three employees took it for a training session in Eastman, which the GPS log confirms."

Elaine sits up straighter. “You know, I might have taken the Elantra. They’re both white and sometimes I get them confused.”

“No, Elaine. You didn’t take any vehicles from our fleet. I checked every single one and your signature was nowhere to be found.”

“What are you getting at?”

“Are you aware the same neighbor called law enforcement right after you called Mrs. Clifford? The call logs confirm it.”

She pales. “No, I wasn’t. The file disappeared. I couldn’t even write my note. I had to write it up and put in the box to be filed by our records department.”

“The reason you couldn’t check it out was because the administrative team had to review it because the department got a complaint filed against us for failure to act. When the police arrived at the scene and found the child still playing with the drill. Luckily, he’d not come to any harm with that, but the police report says he had bruises on his face, arms and legs, in various stages of healing, which would have been noticed if you had actually made the home visit.”

She begins stammering, “I’m sorry. I know I should have made my way out there after I got the push notification, but the mother said it was all lies. Until now, I haven’t found evidence of any kind of abuse going on. It was just low-grade neglect that didn’t justify removal. You’ve got to believe me, I never would have let it go if I truly thought he was in danger.”

“I blame myself for not following up the case. I saw your note and trusted that you’d made the home visit—someone in your position should be capable of handling cases such as this. I even advocated with the admin team to take you off home visits and send you for retraining in case it was something that I had overlooked. However, it is not the first time you have made a mistake, I see you were sent for retraining by your former supervisor. We’ve come to the conclusion that termination is the only solution, for your sake as well that of the children this agency is responsible for supporting.”

“This has been the best job of my life. It’s what I went to college and trained for. I can’t imagine doing anything else with my life.”

“Let me ask you something, Elaine. What would you have done if the police showed up and found Brady Clifford dead or seriously injured?”

She opened her mouth and closed it again.

“Do you really want to be in a job where you have to make those kinds of decisions on a daily basis, always worrying that if you zig when you should have zagged some innocent kid will wind up dead?”

“I thought I did but when you put it that way, maybe not. I just don’t know what I would do with myself if I got fired.”

“Well, I’m sorry to tell you that you are getting fired today. Like I said, the agency doesn’t feel that we have another option. In terms of what you can do moving forward. I would suggest working for one of the local charities that support families in need. There would be less chance of someone getting harmed if you were responsible for approving funding for childcare, emergency utility terminations or food for the needy. Non-profits are nice. I feel like you would really fit in there.”

She began to tear up. “Like they will hire someone who got fired for dereliction of duty. I’m going to end up flipping burgers somewhere.”

“Look Elaine, I’ll give you a chance to resign before I terminate you.”

“Would you give me a good reference?” She asks hopefully.

“That wouldn’t be ethical after you endangered a client and covered it up the way you did. But you could just not list me as a reference.”

“Any future employer is going to want a reference from my former employer.”



“You’ll just have to get creative, volunteer long enough to get a good reference or even use your former professors if they’re willing. At a pinch I might be able to provide a reference regarding your timekeeping and sickness record. But I will not be able to give a reference for the quality of your work.”

“Fine, I’ll work it out somehow.”

“I’m sorry it has to be this way but I’m going to give you a sheet of paper and a pen. If you want to write a letter of resignation, now’s the time.”

“Can’t I go back to my desk and type one out?”

“Unfortunately, not. I’ll need you to go ahead and hand over your employee ID and after you’ve tendered your resignation, I’ll escort you to your desk to gather your things and walk you out. We’ll need you to relinquish any work-related flash drives and passwords for your computer, and our IT department will need to purge your phone of any data related to your former clients.”

Elaine snatches the paper and pen from me and grumbles, “You’re treating me like a common criminal.”

“I’m sorry you feel that way.”

The entire process is over within thirty minutes. When she’s finally out the door, I go to my office and start writing up the details of the separation for her personnel file.

Cleo pops her head in at the end of the day. “How are you holding up? I heard what went down with Elaine. It’s all anybody’s talking about this afternoon.”

“Since I haven’t even turned in my separation report, I’m going to assume that she’s already started complaining to former coworkers?”

“Yes, she’s called about half a dozen people complaining that she got accused of doing things she didn’t do, and how you treated her unfairly and wouldn’t listen to her explanations.”

“I’m sure I don’t need to tell you that none of that is true,” I reply calmly.

“I didn’t think that it was, but I wanted to stop it and tell you one thing. Watch your back with Elaine. She’s always been deceitful, manipulative and a backstabber. Expect her to appeal the decision and throw you right under the bus in an effort to get her job back.”

“Well, that’s not going to happen. Firing her wasn’t even my decision, every single member of the admin team voted to terminate her employment. I gave her an opportunity to resign so it wouldn’t be on her permanent record. Instead of being grateful she’s trying to put the blame on me for her own incompetence. Why does that not surprise me?”

“Because we’re both getting too jaded, that’s why,” Cleo responds. “Want to know what the other thing everyone else is talking about?”

“Probably not, but I’m sure you’re going to tell me.”

“It was you showing up on the back of a hot biker’s motorcycle. People are saying you’re into bad boys and they never knew.”

“Rigs is a freaking minister. Be sure to point that out to them.”

“Oh, I did, and you should have seen the looks on their faces. I don’t think they knew how to reconcile that in their own mind.”

“I wish I could care what the latest gossip was. Unfortunately, I’ve got bigger fish to fry.”

“I know. You’re gonna go home and work on your little project.

“That’s exactly my plan. A fresh pair of eyes always helps.”

“I know how hard this has been for you, Mattie. If you just keep chipping away at it, I know you’ll figure it out. Once you do, Siege, Rigs and the rest of the Savage Legion brothers will be there to back you up.”

“I pray that’s true, because you know I can’t do this on my own. I still can’t for the life of me understand why law enforcement is not taking a more active interest.”

“Because they’re lazy and incompetent. If you do all the footwork, I’m sure they’ll step in in the end, and take all the glory.”

“That sounds about right. And you wonder why we’re so jaded.”

Cleo took a step back, “I’m going to finish up the case I’m working on and head home. You should do the same.”

“Rigs is picking me up at four p.m. sharp. We’re going to take a quick swim.”

“That sounds fun, is this your way of checking out your hot biker’s body, before you test drive him?”

I pull a face at her, I hadn’t actually considered it, but now the thought of Rigs in nothing but swim shorts, enters my mind.

Before turning to leave she looks me dead in the eye, “I’m not joking about Elaine. Seriously watch your back. That woman has fangs and claws.”

## Chapter 9

### Rigs

Siege and I are at his friend's makeshift lab out in the woods. This guy is way on the other side of Dexter weird. He's set up in a barn lined with rickety wooden shelves with his collection of specimens. He has everything from jumbo sized dung beetles to animal skulls to an assortment of rat brains in formaldehyde. The place gives me the creeps, but this guy is good, so I suck it up.

Siege is standing over him demanding answers. "What do you mean you can't lift DNA samples? You're a lab rat. Lab shit is what you do."

"I can swab all this junk for DNA. What I can't do, is give you answers right now."

"Why the hell not. We're paying you good money."

"Lifting the DNA from objects is not as simple as swabbing DNA from the cheek of a human being. You do know that, right? Some of these things will need to be prepared before DNA can be lifted from them. It's a process, Siege. Don't believe the crap you see on TV, this stuff takes hours, sometimes days."

I turn from gazing into the eyes of a badly stuffed owl and ask, "How long will it take? Give us a timeline."

"I'm gonna say at least four or five days, maybe longer. What's the rush by the way?"

I shake the shoebox in front of him. "Look at this fucking shit and tell me what the rush is? Some asshole is sending this shit to my woman as a form of intimidation. Several of these are literal death threats. We need it done right away."

Siege speaks up, "Rigs is right. This job is your top priority. I don't want you to set it aside for any other job. You don't do anything until this job's done. Got it?"

Zeek nods, "I promise, but after this we're square, right? I don't know you anymore favors whatsoever."

"Yes of course this makes us square. And remember we're paying you premium rate, so I want your best work."

You got it," Zeek replies eagerly. "I'll get it done as soon as possible and shoot you a text when I'm finished."

Siege responds firmly, "I'll be looking forward to getting your message, Zeek. Thanks for taking the job. It means a lot to our club and to me personally."

Siege and I step outside. "Can you believe that guy?"

"Yeah, I can actually. He's like seventeen years old, right? I just don't think that pressuring Zeek is the way to go."

"I wasn't pressuring him," Siege insisted. "I was merely driving home the importance of the mission. I'm sure he'll be fine."

"I hope so. Look, I need to leave now if I'm gonna be on time to pick Mattie up from work."

"You're taking playing her protector pretty seriously. I'm glad to see that, Mattie is a nice lady. I would hate to see anything bad happen to her."

"There ain't nothing bad gonna happen to her on my watch. You know that, Siege."

"Tell you what I know, Rigs. That woman is my wife's very best friend and the whole world. Nothing damn well better happened to her. And keep your dick in your pants."

I glare at him.

"Look, I know what you said to her yesterday, but I don't want you messing with her. She's been through a lot, she doesn't need some horny old man chasing after her."

"What the fuck, Siege? You know it's not like that."

"Isn't it? Well, just remember I'm the one who's gonna get an earful from Cleo if anything happens to her, so watch your step." Siege grumbles.

“We need to find out who this Pope character is. When it comes to the syndicate, he’s the last man standing. Once we take him out that should be the end of those sick bastards.”

“I’m hearing what you’re laying down about that, Rigs. Zen’s tracking down every lead he can, we’re cross-referencing every fucker we took down to see if there are any commonalities, places they stayed at, cars they’ve used, doctors they’ve visited anything at all that might point us in the direction of Pope.”

“In the meanwhile, I’ll keep my eyes and ears open in case any of them start snooping around my Mattie.”

“You do that, brother. Let us know if anything suspicious happens and we’ll come running.”

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I get on my bike and start the long journey back into town. I always prefer solo rides because it’s just me, my bike and the open road. There’s something elemental about that. I enjoy the sights and the sounds as my tires eat up mile after mile, each one bringing me closer to the woman I’m falling desperately in love with.

When I pull up to her office and see her standing there waiting for me, my heart lurches in my chest. She’s smiling and seems excited to see me, and I can’t believe my luck. I know I wanted to start off slow and get to know her. But my body hasn’t gotten the message. When she walks up to me, I see her looking at my lips. It makes me wonder if she’s not thinking about stealing a kiss from me as well. But I quickly realize that’s probably wishful thinking on my part.

Once she slides on the seat and wiggles to make herself comfortable behind me and wraps her arms around my waist I almost groan in pleasure. Instead, I rev my engine and take off out of the parking lot.

I take the back road to Smoke’s house. When we pull up, Mattie is wowed by his house. “Your friend has an absolutely beautiful home. It looks like a mansion.”

“It actually a mini mansion. He bought it several years ago and lives here all by himself. Right now, he’s in San Diego visiting with some friends of his from the military. We’ll go through the side gate into the backyard where the pool is.”

She follows me to the gate and waits while I unlock it.

“The prospects got you a swimsuit, I think it should be okay. It looks decent, not like one of those Miami beach thong things.” I hand her the scrap of fabric. I’d specifically asked them to get something their grandmother would be happy in, because I didn’t want Mattie getting embarrassed. But after sending Luca off I remembered what his grandma had worn that time she’d dropped off some meatloaf for him. Luckily, he’d found a plain black swimsuit that wasn’t too revealing.

“Is it okay to go in the cabana to change?” She asks.

“Yeah. You’ll have to turn your head while I get undressed because I’m really shy about women seeing my cock.”

She laughs. “Why do I get the feeling that you’re pulling my leg.”

“Because I am. I have my trunks on under my clothing.”

“Come on, let’s get in the water and enjoy a swim.”

We waste no time getting undressed, and jump into the cool, refreshing water. We swim a few laps and then sit on the steps to bask in the sun. I’m trying not to perve on Mattie, but it’s hard not to notice when she’s sitting beside me wearing nothing but that black swimsuit. It does cover everything, but the way it clings to her curves has my mouth watering. Reminding myself I’m not a sleazy teenager I park my over-active libido and make conversation.

“How was work today? Did you get a lot done?”

Mattie wraps her arms around her knees and sighs. “I had a pretty rough day. We were really busy and toward the end of the day I had to terminate one of our employees. Apparently, this employee has a bit of a vindictive streak. Even Cleo warned me to watch my back with her.”

“That sounds pretty fucked up. Is there anyone more senior that you can go to about this.”

“Since she didn’t threaten me or anything like that, there’s nothing they can really do.”

“Do you really think she’s gonna do something to you?”

I shrug. “Who knows. I’ll just have to wait and see. If something happens, I know how to handle myself. How about you? What kind of day did you have?”

“I spent most of my day with our club president. We’re trying our best to figure out who the last man standing in the syndicate is. We’ve taken down everyone in their regional management team. Now we’re down to the big boss. It’s very likely he’s the one behind all the threats you’ve been receiving. Needless to say, I’m eager to get my hands on him.”

“I’m grateful to hear that you and your club are still tracking members of the syndicate. That’s gonna be a dirty thankless task. I won’t rest easy until every last one of them is behind bars.”

“I really hate that these assholes are targeting you and making you feel afraid.”

“Yeah me too, but I’ve got you and the Savage Legion MC to protect me.” She smiles at me and wiggles her toes in the water, “. We might as well swim another lap or two and then head to your office and start working on our case.”

“You’re almost all business aren’t you, Mattie?”

“There’s a good reason for that. When I was five, I got separated from my parents at the beach. A man walked up to me said he was going to help me find my parents, but instead he took me to his car and tried to drive away with me. I was so young it took me a second to realize that he was trying to abduct me instead of taking me to my parents. Just as we got to the entrance of the parking lot, my dad’s car pulled right in front of him blocking his way. I kept trying to open the door handle, but he had engaged the safety locks. When my dad stormed out of his car, the man jumped out and ran across the



parking lot. My dad was too busy trying to get me out of the vehicle to chase him down.”

“Oh shit, Mattie.” I pull her into my arms and hold her close. “Darlin’, I’m so sorry that happened to you.”

She nuzzled her face into my chest. “I remember how terrified I was when I realized what was happening to me. I felt so helpless and stupid for walking off with him. It kills me a little bit inside every day that these kids are missing. I can’t believe this happened right here in my hometown. I just can’t imagine what those children are out there suffering at the hands of these crazy syndicate members. Sometimes I feel like if I could just find one of them it would be enough to stop the bad dreams and stop feeling so suffocated and anxious every minute of every day. But I know that one will never be enough. I have to find them all.”

“Don’t worry, darlin’. No matter what we’re gonna find every single one of them. And I promise you that I will personally take apart anyone who has hurt them piece by piece.”

“I know that being okay with a statement like that probably makes me a bad person, but I don’t care. I’m tired of fighting the good fight to find these missing kids, and always coming up empty handed.”

“If you want, we can go ahead and leave and get back to work on those files. We’ve had our swim, we can come back again tomorrow.”

She nods.

As we get dressed, I ask, “How many people have you shared your story with? Does Cleo know?”

“I’ve never told that story to anyone. Just me and my parents know what happened that day. It’s hard to talk about and I have never been in a situation where I honestly needed the other person to understand.”

“Well, I’m glad you shared that with me. It helps me understand what’s driving you so hard. Those kids lucky to have someone like you on their side.”

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When we get back to the clubhouse, we pull out everything we have on Evan White and start going through it.

When I was reading through the file this morning, I found something that struck me as odd. Did you know that the foster father worked as a teacher and football coach at Evan's school?" I ask.

"That's not all that unusual."

"According to one of police interviews conducted with Evan's friends, the foster father forced him to join the team and was harder on him than any of the other players."

"I don't think I ever got around to reading that particular report, but I question how reliable the report of the peer was. Teens don't always have a good grasp on things like that." Mattie says.

"Someone copied Evan's report cards for the file. It looks like the one and only class he failed was the one his foster father taught."

"This is beginning to look like verification that there was some interpersonal conflict going on between the two of them that may be the foster father minimized when he asked for Evan to be removed from the home."

"It's pretty early in the evening. What do you think about paying the foster father a visit? We could ask him to describe what was going on in a little more detail and try to get a feel for it whether or not it was just a teenager acting out or if the foster father had some genuine resentment toward Evan." I say, it's a longshot but it's somewhere to start.

"I'm totally game for that. I can tell the foster family then I'm wrapping up the details of his case, which isn't far from the truth."

"I'm curious about his actual disappearance. How in the world did that happen? I can't get a good handle on it from reading his chart."

“A CPS worker, who is no longer with our agency was assigned to transport Evan from the home of his foster family to a therapeutic halfway house for violent teens. The worker came back, made a note in the chart that transfer had been made successfully, and even had a signature for the person who supposedly took possession of him at the halfway house. We do thirty-day and ninety-day checks. The thirty-day check went off without a hitch, with the employee on the other end of the phone verifying that he was still there and actively engaged in treatment. The ninety-day check was a completely different story—they didn’t know who I was talking about and there had never been an Evan White admitted to their facility.”

“And the staff member who did the transport is no longer with the agency, right? I’m going to assume the signature of the receiving facility was discovered to be from a former employee who is no longer there.”

“It’s worse than that. The signature of the person from the receiving facility was for someone who never worked there. It was the same individual who answered the thirty-day follow-up call.”

“I can’t believe somebody walked into that facility with that young man and there was no record of it. No security footage. Nothing.”

“That struck me as odd as well. At some point I started to suspect that perhaps they never made it to the facility, but the contact on the inside was in place, and ready to say all the right things. We tried to track down the employee but it’s like they just vanished into thin air.”

“Or it was a false identity to start out with.”

“That’s a possibility I hadn’t even thought of. I guess it’s just difficult for me to believe that someone could have lied to a federal agency about their identity.”

“It happens more often than you think. There are some people who forge documents so well no one would ever know they’re fake. Can you get your hands on the employee’s personnel file? If so, maybe our IT guy can try to figure out what’s going on. He uses facial recognition software so a copy

of the image they used for the employee ID would really help.”

“I don’t know if that would be possible. Being a manager, I can access client records all day long and even check them out for auditing, but employee records never leave HR.”

“Okay, maybe gather as much information as you can remember about the employee. See if there are any company pictures that include a clear picture of their face, maybe a holiday dinner or some kind of team building event.”

“I could definitely do that.”

“Let’s go ahead and head out to the foster family’s house before it gets too late.”

## Chapter 10

### *Mattie*

Since I didn't personally work on Evan's case, I don't remember ever meeting his foster father, Andrew Strawn. If he came into the office at any point, I don't remember seeing him. The file says his wife is named Margaret and they have a ten-year old son, Richie.

When we get to the home and ring the bell, a middle-aged man answers the door. "Hello, can I help you?"

"Yes" I respond politely. "I'm looking for Mr. Andrew Strawn."

"That's me."

I jump right into the heart of the matter. "I'm Matilda Mathews a department manager at Las Salinas Child Protective Services. My partner and I want to ask a few questions about one of your former foster children, so we can close his case."

The man steps out onto the porch and shuts the door behind him. "This must be about Evan. He's the only foster child we've taken in. It was a rather bad experience for my family, and we decided that perhaps fostering isn't for us."

"I'm sorry to hear that, can you tell me a little bit about the problems that you had with Evan?"

"Sure," the man responds tightly. "Evan was a problem from day one. He didn't like to shower or brush his teeth. He would only wear the clothing he arrived in. He refused to follow directions, do his homework or be respectful of our family members. He was with us for almost a year, but we finally had to call it quits because my wife was having a nervous breakdown with his moodiness."

"The report mentioned aggression, talk to me about what kinds of violence he exhibited in the home."

“Jesus there was a ton of stuff, like becoming explosive if someone accidentally walked in the bathroom when he was showering or shoving my son aside to walk past him. He even took a swing at me one day because I asked him to clean his room. It was always a pigsty in there.”

In my opinion the things Mr. Strawn was describing were very typical adjustment type issues for troubled teens—or even just the spectrum of regular teen behavior. I wouldn’t have considered any of that worth ending a placement over.

“Can you tell me a little bit about his extracurriculars, I believe he was on the football team. “His coach reported he was oppositional there as well,” Mr. Strawn adds quickly.

Perplexed, I ask, “Correct me if I’m wrong, but weren’t you the coach at that time?”

“Well yes, I was the primary coach,” he admits reluctantly. My assistant was responsible for ensuring most of the exercises and scrimmage matches took place. He was the one who reported that Evan was constantly causing trouble and not following directions.”

“What was the assistant coach’s name, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“What difference does it make? This case is eight months old.”

I lower my voice to appear less confrontational. “I just need to add it to my notes. When a child goes missing when in state care it is a very serious matter. I don’t want my superiors to think I didn’t conduct a proper closing interview with you.”

Strawn manages to dial back his frustration enough to answer. “His name was William Winslow. He’s no longer employed at Las Salinas High.”

“Speaking of Las Salinas High, it’s my understanding that you were one of Evan’s teachers. Isn’t that considered a conflict of interest, having a parent and in official teaching position for their own child?”

“No. Not at all. First of all, Evan wasn’t my child. I was simply fostering him on a temporary basis. In any event,

parents sometimes end up teaching their own children in a public-school setting, especially in small towns. Evan was in my American history class.”

“What was his academic performance like?”

“Evan was a smart kid. He did well when he applied himself. Mostly he didn’t because he was too caught up in all the things going wrong with this life.”

I keep probing with open ended questions. “What kind of things were those?”

“If you’ve read his file it shouldn’t come as any surprise to you that Evan didn’t want to be removed from his home, much less placed with the foster family. He had been living with his elderly grandmother until she ended up in a nursing home and could no longer care for him. Evan was furious that he couldn’t just stay in their family home.”

“Of course that wouldn’t have been possible,” I acknowledge.

There’s a brief pause and he then asks, “Is that it for questions? My wife is making dinner and I have some chores to do before we sit down to eat.”

Rigs speaks up. “When was the last time you saw Evan?”

“It was eight months ago, give or take a few days. I don’t remember exactly,” Strawn replies nonchalantly.

Rigs presses him for more information. “Do you remember who it was that picked him up from your home?”

I looked between Rigs and Strawn, noticing the tone of Strawn’s voice changes slightly once he’s talking to Rigs. Maybe he’s one of those men who don’t like women in authority. “You would know the answer to that question better than me, since it was someone from your department.”

“Humor me,” Rigs shoots back. “Was the person who picked him up a male or a female? What did they look like? What were they wearing? Did they show you an official ID? Surely, you must remember who picked up the child in your

care. It was your job to take care of him, so I'm sure you were diligent about checking the person's ID."

"What has this got to do with anything? Look, I'm about done being interrogated by you two."

Rigs keeps the pressure on. "You can either answer our questions or we can come back with a warrant and ask questions to every member of your family including your wife and son."

Anger jumps onto Strawn's face for a brief second before he wipes his expression clean. "If I remember correctly, it was a middle-aged white man, he did show his ID, and near as I can remember he was wearing a dark business suit."

"Can you think of anything else that might have a bearing on his disappearance?"

"I've already been questioned several times. I already made it known that I think he ran away, in the last couple of weeks he was here he was moody, more so than usual. He's probably creeping around his old house, still trying to live on his own. That's all he talked about when he was with us."

I step in and extend my hand "Thank you so much for speaking with us Mr. Strawn. We're sorry to have kept you from your family. I hope you have a nice evening."

"If you have any more questions for me, why don't you e-mail them to me like your old supervisor did?"

"I'll certainly do that. Thank you again for your cooperation."

Rigs shoots me a knowing look as we approach his bike. He grabs his leather vest and puts it back on, he'd taken it off before we visited Strawn, as trying to pass himself off as a CPS worker while wearing an MC cut probably wouldn't have been the wisest thing.

"Let's talk about it at the clubhouse." I say.

Glancing over his shoulder at the house, he agrees, "Yeah, that makes good sense."



All the way back to the clubhouse, I think over Strawn's squirrely responses to our questions. I know Rigs picked up on it as well. It was also strange that he didn't have a kind word to say upon the child that he fostered for an entire year. Normally when placements go bad the exit interview reveals some guilt or regret by the foster parent. There was none of that going on with Mr. Strawn.

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Once we get to the clubhouse, we grab a plate of food and head to our office to process what just happened. By this time I'm absolutely starving and go ahead and dig into my pork BBQ while Rigs is still getting settled.

"Damn girl, you must be famished."

"I am. I got distracted at lunch and didn't get to finish eating. I plan to make up for it tonight."

"I think talking to Strawn made me lose my appetite. He's a complete dickhead."

"Yeah, I agree with you about that. I don't know how some of these parents make it through the screening process without getting weeded out. Strawn didn't strike me as a man with very much empathy or compassion for the child he agreed to foster."

"The thing that stood out in my mind, was him being reluctant to admit that he was the boy's football coach. For some reason that just seems shady to me."

I swallow the food in my mouth before responding. "I thought it strange how he balked at giving us the assistant coach's name too. I really got the impression he didn't want us talking to Mr. Winslow about Evan. Also, the way he closed the door when we first arrived made it very clear that he didn't want us talking to his wife or his son either. That's the kind of thing that people do when they're lying. They want to keep everyone separated, so their lies don't accidentally end up being revealed."

"That makes perfect sense and it's exactly the reason why we should follow up with the assistant coach and maybe try to

talk to the wife while he's at work. I've asked Zen, our IT guy to run a background check on the entire family. Once he gets that information back to us, we'll know whether or not she works, as well and where."

"I'm not comfortable approaching their son without a parent present. That's not appropriate and could get our department into trouble."

"Maybe the wife will agree to let us talk to him as long as she remains present."

"Anything's possible, but I think the father will throw an absolute fit if he finds out."

"Finding a missing kid trump's his feelings on the matter," Rigs says while chewing a mouthful of the BBQ.

"I agree, though everything has to be done by the book."

Rigs pulls out his cell phone up again thumbing through it. "I'm going to ask Zen to see if he can verify that William Winslow once worked at Las Salinas High School, see if we can find out why he's no longer there, and where he went. It shouldn't take him long to get that information, and once we have it, we can pay him a visit too."

I take a drink of my tea before asking, "Do you think what Strawn said about Evan going back to his old home was true?"

"It's possible," Rigs answers. "If that was the only place he knew as home. Maybe he thought his grandmother going into the nursing home was temporary, and he wanted to be there when she was discharged."

"I can see how he might have thought that. Unfortunately, nursing homes are not like hospitals. Someone really should have explained the difference to him."

"Maybe they did, and he just wasn't listening. I think that teens in crisis often hear what they want to hear."

"I know that to be true. I hope this turns out to be like Strawn said, and that Evan is with his extended family. I could see them not wanting to notify the department for fear that we might pick him back up. For some reason families that have a

child removed are often reluctant to contact us, even in cases like Evan's, when the removal was because his caregiver was hospitalized, rather than for neglect or abuse. I guess they don't understand our primary goal is family reunification. They just see us as the bad guys taking their kids away and making them jump through a bunch of hoops to get them back."

"It could also be that even though his extended family is willing to take him in, none of them would meet the official criteria to be approved as his guardian."

"I can see how that would be possible. We do have to do in home visits and make sure that there's hot and cold running water, there's adequate parental supervision in the home and the individual has a private sleeping space."

While Rigs sends off messages to the IT guy, I make fast work of the food, I hadn't realized how hungry I was. I'd not been eating well lately, but now that we were starting to make headway with these cases I find my appetite has come back with a vengeance.

# Chapter 11

## *Mattie*

**W**e were about to continue with our work when suddenly an alarm sounds, loud and shrill. Rigs jumps to his feet. “That’s our perimeter alert. I need you to go downstairs and lock yourself in my suite, and don’t come out until I call you or come for you myself. No matter what you hear going on outside that door do not unlock the door for anyone.”

My heart is racing, “Rigs, you’re scaring me. What’s happening? I thought you said this was a safe place.”

He unlocks the drawer on the right side of his desk and pulls out a large handgun. “It might be nothing, but I’m not taking any chances. This clubhouse is the safest place on earth for you right now. It’s filled with men who will give their lives to protect you and we’ve got enough weapons and ammo to fight a small war. We’ve got this.”

I swallow thickly, suddenly reluctant to see him putting himself in harm’s way. I say, “Please stay safe out there and watch your back.”

Rigs wraps one arm around my waist it gives me a quick kiss on the forehead. “Don’t you worry about me, sugar. I know how to handle a gun.” He guides me to the door. “You just get to my suite and lock yourself in like I asked. Whatever this is, will be over before you know it.”

I do as he says and race upstairs to his suite, slam the door shut and pull the dead bolt. That’s when I realize there are two more locks, one at the very top of the door and another at the very bottom. I lock the bottom one first and then grab a chair so I can reach the top one. I also realize at this moment that the door isn’t wooden as I had first thought, but painted steel—a bit like the doors bank vaults have. His suite is essentially a safe room. I thought I knew a bit about the Savage Legion

from Cleo, but this brings it home as to what a dangerous life they lead.

My mind is racing with possibilities of what could be going on outside, shutters have come across the windows so I can't see a thing. I suppose anything from a wild animal to an actual incursion could have tripped in perimeter alert. When I hear what sounds like gunfire outside the window, I realize it's probably not a wild animal. I can only think of a short list of reasons someone might be trying to get into the clubhouse and unfortunately, I'm at the top of that list.

All the warnings the syndicate left on my door rise in my mind, one after another. They threatened to do terrible things to me, and I just shoved all those notes into a drawer and pretended like it wasn't happening. It's pretty clear to me at this point that if something like this had happened at my apartment, I wouldn't have stood a chance. Right now, good men are risking their lives to protect me, and I don't know how I feel about that. On the one hand I never asked them to do it but on the other I don't want to see any of them get hurt, least of all Rigs. I'm finally forced to admit to myself that I've fallen hard for this hard-working biker. I never thought in a million years I would fall so hard and so fast for anyone but there's no denying I have it bad for Rigs.

I pace back and forth for what seems like hours. A quick glance at my phone tells me that it's only been a little less than thirty minutes. I hear shouting and the roar of motorcycle engines as the shooting dies down.

When everything grows quiet, I start to wonder if I should leave the room and go out and check on them. I know Rigs told me to stay in his suite until he came for me, but what if the Savage Legion lost whatever battle they were fighting outside? There could be brothers lying dead or bleeding out right now. I can't stay here and do nothing. Even if there is a small chance that I might be able to help someone, I've got to take it.

I start walking toward the door with every intention of throwing the locks open and rushing out to see if there's anyone left to save, after sliding open the top and bottom locks

just as I'm about to put my hand on the dead bolt, I hear someone on the other side.

When the key turns in the lock I hold my breath, hoping and praying that Rigs is the one to walk through the door rather than some member of the syndicate.

When the door swings open and I see Rigs walk through bloodied and battered, I run straight to him and throw my arms around his waist. There's this wretched noise that hurts my ears. It takes me a second to realize it's my own ragged sobs.

Rigs arms come around me like steel bands, and he pulls me into a tight embrace. I feel him press his cheek against the top of my head. He murmurs, "It's okay. Don't cry, sugar. I can't take anything except your tears."

I don't reply because I can't. I'm too busy fighting back my tears, I'm trying to get a hold of myself. I'm used to crisis situations, just not ones involving guns. It takes me a couple of minutes, but I finally managed to calm down.

Without looking up I ask, "Who was it that breached the perimeter? I heard gunfire. I's everyone okay?"

"Pretty much. My arm was grazed by a bullet, and one of our prospects was shot in the shoulder. Other than that, we're all good."

"Who did this?" I ask.

"There aren't many people stupid enough to roll upon the Savage Legion on our own turf. It had to be Hellfire Hounds MC or the fucking syndicate. It turned out to be the latter.

My head jerks up and I look him in the eyes. "It was because of me, wasn't it?"

"Now Mattie, don't go jumping to conclusions."

"It has to be me," I insist. "I'm the one they targeted. I'm the one they threatened. And tonight, they came to make good on their threats." Before Rigs can say anything a horrible thought pops into my head. "Oh my God, do you think them coming here tonight has anything to do with us interviewing Mr. Strawn?"

Rigs puts both hands on my shoulders. “The Savage Legion was in a war with the syndicate long before you got involved. Remember what happened with Siege’s sister’s kids? You and Cleo were just regular CPS employees then. I already told you we took out several of their low-level operatives, rescued some missing kids and the women they had held at their facilities. A few months ago, we took out three members of the original management. At this point, they’re gonna be getting desperate, we believe we’re down to the person in charge. To say that he’s pissed at us would be an understatement. We’ve almost dismantled his whole operation and he’s fucking furious with the Savage Legion. That’s what today was all about. That syndicate leader sent some henchman because he wanted some payback. They got their asses handed to them instead.”

“These guys were definitely syndicate?”

“Like most gang members they have tattoos or markings. With the syndicate they view their members as property, and they’re branded with the word SYN. The first time I saw one of their brands I thought it was something religious, the guy had other tattoos with crosses and shit. The men we killed tonight had the same markings on their chest. Some had brands, others had tattoos. I’m guessing a tattoo means they’re higher up in the food chain.”

Men they killed, I’m too scared to ask how many. What have I stumbled into? But I try and focus myself, I’m involved in all this and I have to make myself useful. “I know this sounds morbid, but can we take close-ups of the brands and tattoos? Our department has been working in cooperation with the state police task force that specializes in gang violence. We have training sessions twice a year, and nothing has ever been said about the syndicate. Images of the brands and tattoos might help them identify syndicate members who are already in the system, and stragglers that end up being arrested in the future.”

Rigs nods his head. “Yes. I can do that if you want. I hate to ask, but would you be able to take a look at the men, see if

there's anyone you recognize? If not, I can take photos of their faces if you prefer."

I wasn't wild about the idea, but I had a reason for wanting to see them. Know your enemy. Did I actually know any of these men who had come to attack us tonight? I take a deep breath, "This isn't the first time that I've seen a dead body. If it helps move our investigation forward, I'll do pretty much anything at this point."

There's a brief pause between the two of us as we look into each other's eyes, the grim realization of our situation settled around us.

"So I guess killing some of his operatives is going to piss the leader of the syndicate off even more. What do you think he's got planned next?" I ask.

"He's going to be furious. But so long as he's angry and preoccupied with vengeance, that gives us an opportunity zero in on him. He's providing us just the distraction we need to nail his ass once and for all. When people like that are cornered, they start to get sloppy and make mistakes. You wondered if this had something to do with us speaking to Strawn earlier? I don't know. But if it did it means we're closing in."

I slowly untangle my hand from his shirt and smooth it back down. "You always sound so confident. I'm going to borrow some of your confidence tonight because I desperately need it."

"Feel free to borrow anything I've got, sugar."

I smile weakly.

"Those bodies are not getting any fresher. Hate to be pushy, but I think you probably want to see them now as opposed to tomorrow."

"I'm not thrilled, but yeah, let's get out of here and have a look while they're fresh." I suppress a shudder and resolve to pull on my big girl panties.

"I told Tank and Dutch, to clean off as much blood as possible because you really need to their faces."



“And markings,” I say.

“How the hell are you planning to explain photos of dead bodies to your professional buddies in the state police. Won’t they want the scoop on who killed them.”

“I hadn’t thought that far yet. But we could always print them out and send them anonymously. Or strip away the metadata from the images and just telling them that an anonymous person sent them to me via e-mail or text.”

“It’s pretty damn clear that you know the value of an occasional white lie for the greater good.” Rigs laughs.

“I don’t like to lie, but in this situation I think it’s critically important for the gang task force to know about the syndicate. These people are the nearest thing we have to organized crime. The police need to be aware that these people are out there, doing horrible deeds virtually unencumbered by law enforcement. The task force can’t afford to be oblivious about the syndicate anymore.”

“I agree one hundred percent. We can only hope that the entire force hasn’t been corrupted. Now, let’s get downstairs and see if you recognize any of the assholes who tried to wreak havoc on our club tonight.”

Rigs keeps his arm around me as we walk, a gesture that feels both protective and intimate. He takes me out to the patio and the screened off area at the far end. The clubhouse is in a fairly isolated location, but it’s clear that they aren’t taking any chances. I wonder for a moment what would be done with the bodies afterwards, but I quickly park that thought. I really don’t want to know.

Siege motions us over. I can see three bodies clearly outlined under what appear to be thin blue tarps. When we get close, Siege pulls back the top of the first tarp. Underneath is a middle-aged man with a dark beard and black hair. He has a scar running down his right temple. Not an ounce of recognition sparks in my mind when I look at him.

“I don’t recall ever seeing this man before.”

Rigs pulls out his phone and jerks his chin to Siege. “My Mattie wants to capture images of each syndicate brand or tattoo. We think it might help with our case.”

Siege shrugs, immediately pulls the tarp down and opens the man’s button up shirt to reveal his chest tattoo. Just like Rigs explained, there is a large intricate tattoo with the letters SYN entwined with vines and roses sprawling across the man’s chest. I wait patiently as he snaps several close-up shots of the man’s ink. Then we move on to the second body. This is the body of a younger man. He has a boyish face and sandy blond hair. He doesn’t look old enough to be wielding a weapon, much less trying to kill people. I wonder if he’s even an adult. As I gaze down at him, I decide he looks like he is in his early twenties. So, I guess he is technically an adult.

“I’m sorry, I don’t think I’ve ever seen this one before either.”

Siege pulls his T-shirt up to his chin and Rigs takes a few pictures of his chest. He has a brand, it looks fresh and it is still healing. I know where’re all responsible for our own decisions but this young man being dead doesn’t sit right with me. I can’t help but think his parents, society, or the system failed him.

“The brand,” I say, “You said that signifies ownership. Do you think he was a member, or could they have made him do this?”

Rigs shrugs, “We’ve had cases where some of the trafficked kids ended up joining the syndicate, either by force or by choice.”

I fight back the tears. I can’t think about what this young man might have gone through. I’ve got to focus on the job at hand. As a CPS supervisor I know only too well what horrors can happen to kids, but seeing this young man lying here is so unspeakably sad. Such a wasted life.

When we move on to the third and final body, I’m not holding out much hope that I will recognize this one either. However, when Siege pulls back the tarp, shock rolls through

my mind. He has dark brown hair, tanned skin, and a goatee. I recognize his face right away.

Rigs speaks, “You look like you’ve just seen a ghost. Just calm down, take some deep breaths, and talk when you’re ready. “His name is Ishal Hall. He’s the maintenance man at my apartment complex. He always seemed so nice and friendly. He’s been working there for years, long before any of us were involved in trying to bring the syndicate down. This just doesn’t make any sense.”

Rigs and Siege exchange a knowing look. Rigs explained gently. “They probably lured him in recently. My best guess is around the time that you stepped into Anita’s old job. They knew you had access to her work computer and all of her files. Any halfway smart villain what they concerned about what you would find when you sat down in her chair.”

I have a thought, “Cleo and I were looking for those missing kids for two or three months before Anita wound up dead. Remember how Cleo got fired, and it turned out Anita was trying to get her to spy on the MC?” I’m still trying to get my head around the fact that Ishal was involved in the syndicate, and I never picked up on the fact that he was watching me. It seems incomprehensible to me. Even looking back, I don’t remember anything that stands out strange or odd about him. That’s when a horrible thought occurs to me. “Do you think it’s possible that Ishal might have bugged my house for the syndicate? I mean, how would he know what I was up to? We talked, but it was more polite chitchat rather than anything personal.”

Rigs freezes with his camera still lifted in the air. “Fuck, why didn’t I think of that. I was too busy wanting to get you safe, I didn’t think to check out your apartment. What you’re saying makes a lot of sense. He had unfettered access to your home when you were at work. He had plenty of opportunities to install cameras or listening devices.”

Siege speaks up. “With your permission, I’d like to take Zen with me and have a look around your place. If there is anything there that shouldn’t be, we’ll find it.”

Rigs chimes in, “You don’t want to go home only to find that his surveillance gear is still in place.”

Truth be told, the thought of whoever is hired to take Ishal’s place ending up with a free peep show makes me sick of my stomach. I don’t know if or how long he might have been monitoring what I was doing inside my apartment, but just knowing it’s a possibility feels like a huge violation.

As if sensing how upset I am, Rigs wraps his arms around me. “I can see that you’re getting overwhelmed, it’s a lot to take in. You’ve been going hard at this for hours since you got off work. It’s nearing midnight. You either need to get some sleep or think about taking a personal day tomorrow.”

“I’m a manager. I can’t just call in whenever I want.”

“Sure you can,” Rigs insists. “Even supervisors get sick. In order for you to be emotionally available when you’re at work you need to take care of yourself. You’re no good to anyone if the breakdown you’re about to have happens at work tomorrow.”

“I’m not having a breakdown, damn it.”

“All I’m saying, is that no one can deal with the kind of stress you’ve been dealing with and not get close to breaking point. Even the strongest person has to engage in a little self-care when the going gets tough. You’re not superhuman. You’re just one woman trying her best to save the world. Take a damn day off.”

Tears sting the back of my eyes as I fight to keep them from spilling down my cheeks. “I’ll think about it, okay?”

Rigs holds up both of his hands in a placating gesture. Then he stated softly, “I care about you Mattie. It would kill me to have to watch you break under the stress these assholes are putting you through.”

I wrap my arms around his waist and bury my face in his chest. “Fine, I’ll take a day off just for you.”

“Thank you, sugar. We’re in this together. I’m not going to let anything bad happen to you. Come on, let’s head back to

our suite and try to get some sleep. Maybe things will look different in the morning.”

“What about Ishal’s tattoo? We haven’t taken a picture of that yet.”

Siege pulled out his cell phone. “I’ll take care of that, and send the images to Rigs. Get some sleep.”

## Chapter 12

### *Rigs*

**T**onight has been horrific, not only for me but for my Mattie as well. As near as we can tell almost a dozen syndicate thugs descended on our property, unfortunately we only got three of the bastards. Once we'd secured the area, I immediately went inside to check on Mattie, that woman surprises me every single time. Sure, she was scared, but she was also so brave. She'd actually been coming to see if any of the brothers needed help. I should have been annoyed she was considering disobeying my orders, but her loyalty to the Savage Legion warmed my heart. She's a strange mixture of strength, beauty, determination and feminine frailty. In other words, Mattie it's the perfect woman for me. She's the type who'll be right by my side while I fight the good fight, encouraging me, while also worrying over my safety. What more could a man want in life?

When we're inside of my suite, I shut the door and turn to the woman I love. "I'm a mess right now. I need to grab a shower."

She looks me over with a critical eye. "You most certainly do need a shower. I do too, want me to scrub your back?"

My mouth drops open in surprise. "Can you say that again? I'm not quite sure I caught that."

"I want to forget this entire evening and you are just the man to make that happen."

She grabs my hand and pulls me toward the bathroom. Happiness surges in my chest at the thought of my Mattie tenderly caring for her protector after a hard battle. This was a reward worth fighting for. Fuck, just the thought of her soft soapy hands running over my body is enough to make my cock hard.

I throw my bloodstained clothes on the floor as I watch her start a shower for us. By the time she turns around, I'm standing naked waiting for her approval. Her eyes open wide as she catches sight of what I'm packing. My cock is thick and erect, no doubt the fucker is pleased that after months of drought, tonight is gonna make it worth the wait. Her gaze drifts down and I know she's wondering about my piercing. She'll see soon enough why the club girls used to fight over me for a chance to take a ride. But from now on my cock belongs to only one woman, and she's standing in front of me.

She flashes me a grin. "There was me thinking you were the shy and retiring type. What is it they say about the quiet ones?"

"Ain't nothing quiet going on in this room tonight, sweetheart."

"Alright, slow your roll baby. We've got all night."

I laugh. Some might say that us getting together was quick, but I have known Mattie for many long months, it might have taken some time to get to this moment, but now she was in my room and my life I didn't want to let her go.

I take a step closer to her. "And we have tomorrow as well," I remind her. "You'll be staying in bed with me all day tomorrow."

Her smile becomes a little more enthusiastic as her worries drift away. "I never said I was staying in bed with you all day tomorrow. I simply said that I will call out of work."

"I plan to fuck you so well tonight, that you'll not want to be anywhere else except in my bed for an endless age."

"You sounded almost poetic there for a minute."

"Do you need getting help getting undressed?"

Her hands automatically come up to the front of her shirt, but her expression turns mischievous, and she drops them. "Maybe I do. I've never been undressed by a man before. It could be fun."

I reach out and begin unbuttoning her shirt to reveal her bra beneath. For some reason I was expecting her to be all plain white cotton, but the black lace threw me for a second. I guess like with what I hide in my pants, you never know what's underneath the prim and proper clothing.. Seeing her naked for the first time is an eye opener, with her full breasts and shapely hips, my mouth is practically watering. "Mattie, you take my breath away."

"You've got a thing for average women, do you?"

I reach down to stroke my hard, dripping cock. "You are far from average, sugar. You are every man's wet dream. Not that I want other men having sexual thoughts about you. It would be better if they didn't so I wouldn't be obliged to beat the idea out of their minds."

I backtrack, "I didn't mean to talk about beating people. For some reason when I see you in all your glory, I can't seem to keep my foot out of my mouth, when all I want is to feel your pussy wrapped around my cock."

Her eyes go to my hand as I stroke myself slowly.

"Fuck, I can't stop looking at you. What am I doing standing here like an idiot with my hand around my cock. I've been thinking about this moment for months." What is she going to think of me, I've been trying to romance this woman, and when time finally comes, I'm like an awestruck teenager.

"Oh, I like listening to you ramble incoherently. I've definitely never had a guy lose his mind over me before."

"I find that impossible to believe. Any man who saw you naked would think of touching and tasting you, wondering how it would feel to be inside you."

Mattie takes a step closer and stands in front of me, my cock is rigid and as the tip grazes her stomach, I let out a hiss. In all the fantasies I've had about this woman, none of them started with her making a move on me, and it's a million times hotter than anything my mind came up with. This gorgeous, amazing woman was horny for me, this woman knew what she



wanted and went after it, and it was clear that she was gonna be more than a match for me.

“You’ve got nice balls,” she murmurs as her hand caresses my sack. “Big heavy ones.”

“Just wait until I fill you up with my come.”

“Yet, you’re going to save it all for me, right?”

“All for you,” I say. I can’t wait to shoot my load into this woman, to see my seed trickle down her thighs.

Her eyes go back to my piercing, “So does that make sex better for you?”

I glance at my straining cock, sure when I’m thrusting balls deep in wet pussy, the movement I feel is fucking out of this world, but she’s in for surprise, “It’s not all about me, you’ll find out soon enough.”

“Will I now?” she says and turns, giving me a view of her glorious ass as she steps toward the shower.

My cock twitches at the sight and a pearl of precum glisten. I rub it in with the palm of my hand. I have never been so eager for a woman as I am for my Mattie tonight. Perhaps my adrenaline is still elevated from the battle earlier. Or perhaps the woman I love is just that alluring.

When we climb into the shower, I feel the warm water splash against my back.

She soaps her hands up and then wiggles all ten fingers, as though she can’t decide which part of my body she wants to start washing first. I solved that problem for her by grasping her wrists and bringing them out to glide against my chest.

“Your chest is hard, all muscle.”

I run my hands through the lather, and then reach out to touch her breasts which are full and heavy. “You are the opposite of hard, you don’t know how many nights I’ve thought about this.” Cupping her breasts in my hands, I push them together, her dark pink nipples are tight and tempting and I lick my lips in anticipation.

“I can’t help but wonder if you could manage to get your mouth around one of my plump nipples.” My Mattie teases me. I love how sweet and playful and open she is with me. This is what I have been missing in my life. I need it more than I need air to breathe and the sunshine on my face.

“Your nipples look far too delicious not to taste.”

If she had thought at that moment, I was going to suck those tasty nipples she was offering to me, she would have been very much mistaken. I might be a rough worn-out old biker, but I’m a gentleman first and foremost. I realize I’ve never kissed my Mattie and while I want to taste every single inch of her, I want her lips first.

I cup her face in my hands and bring my mouth down toward her. She claims my lips so delicately that it makes my whole body shake with need. Her tongue sweeps into my mouth dancing against mine and I know bliss like I’ve never known it before.

Having the woman I love naked in my arms as she kisses me, is the most arousing feeling in the world. It makes me feel wanted and desired on a whole new level. Other women have been all too eager to ride my cock, but they don’t take the trouble to get inside my head. No, they rushed past all that in their eagerness to enjoy my best attribute.

Mattie pulls back we stare to each other’s eyes for a long moment.

“I don’t know about you, but I think that was pretty amazing,” she says breathlessly.

“It was by far the best kiss of my life,” I tell her sincerely. “Nothing comes close to being with you, sugar. If you permit me, I will worship your body like no man ever has. Having you climax under my tongue will be an honor.”

Both of her hands come up to cover my mouth. “You need to stop talking. You’re making me far too wet.”

Needing no further encouragement, I reach for the shower head and rinse us both off, before turning off the water. Wrapping Mattie in two huge towels I carry her to my bed and

lay her down. Seeing her skin flushed with the heat of the water and desire, makes my balls tight. Fuck, I want this woman like no other, but round one is gonna be all about her.

Mattie looks at me with a wicked glint in her eye and cups her heavy breasts as though she's offering them to me. I scramble forward, unable to resist her for a moment longer.

Before she can say a word, I have my lips covering one nipple, pulling it into my mouth and sucking. It isn't long before she's making these lovely sounds of pleasure, so I turn my attention to her other nipple. They're glistening with saliva, just waiting for my hot mouth to pleasure them, I lift my head up and blow on her wet skin.

"Fuck," Mattie says breathlessly.

"Patience," I say as my tongue circles her hard nipples, her breasts are pushed together, and I lap from one to the other, flicking and pulling. "You're gonna hold that orgasm in, I want to feel you coming against my mouth."

I lift my head and look her in the eye. "You want to feel my mouth on you? Is your pussy ready for that?"

Mattie nods and I start trailing a path from her breasts and down her stomach. I stop at the top of her slit, teasing her lips.

"Gonna let me see what's hiding there, sugar?"

Then she spreads her legs, wordlessly making her second offering of the night. Her pussy is glistening, and happiness surges through me when I see how wet she is for me.

I tease my tongue along her slit, being careful not to dive in too quickly, my Mattie is on the edge and I'm going to string this out as long as possible. That's when I pull her pretty slit open and take a brief moment to allow the delicate scent of her arousal to fill my nostrils. Fuck, after so many months of denial my cock is ready to burst. After rubbing my mouth up and down her tempting slit until I can take it no longer, I delve in with eagerness and lap at her folds, capturing every delicious morsel of her arousal on my tongue. The salty taste of her body makes my already stiff cock painfully hard, and my balls draw up.

I shove my cock down and concentrate on pleasuring my woman. I run my tongue over the top of her swollen clit and around it in tight circles, pushing her arousal higher and higher. Then I suck it into my mouth. A few gentle tugs later and she's shuddering and coming with my name on her lips. Male pride surges through me, but this is only the start.

I leisurely lap at her folds until she comes down and then I start all over again. This time, I slide one finger inside her pussy and search around for her g-spot. I find it within seconds and start pressing it, as I suck on her clit again, I can feel her writhing and moaning under me as I add another finger and keep up the rhythm.

"You like that, babe? You like feeling full?" I ask huskily.

"Mm," is all my Mattie can get out, as her hips start to buck under me.

"Just wait until you feel my piercing rubbing you. We're just getting warmed up now."

She starts shuddering, so I slow, allowing her arousal to die down, but still keeping her on the edge. Then I start up again, hooking my fingers and stroking her g-spot. Circling and tapping it. Her juices are flowing, and my lips and beard are slick with her arousal as I suck at her clit. My cock is straining, desperate to be sheathed in her pussy and I'm dripping precum. Every movement I make is causing my swollen head to rub against the towels I've spread on the bed. Fuck, I don't know how much longer I can hold out, but I use every ounce of willpower to fight.

Mattie's shuddering and shaking under my touch, and the combination of her moans and the noises my fingers make slipping in and out of her wetness, almost takes me over the edge, she's close to coming apart, so I hook my fingers inside her and start making small circles around her g-spot, pressing and tapping and coaxing. That is the magical combination that makes her come screaming my name and I feel a gush as her juices coat my lips, and I lap up her arousal. Her breathless cries are like music to my ears. Pure male pride surges in my

chest that I've made her come not once, but twice without even using my thick cock.

Seeing my Mattie lying there, her thighs slick with her juices and her pussy pink and glistening is a vision I have tried to imagine, but nothing comes close to the reality of seeing my woman satisfied.

I lick my lips slowly, "You taste so good, sugar. Thank you for your generous gift."

"Rigs," she says, once she can get her breath back. "What the fuck just happened?"

"You never squirted before?" I ask. I'm guessing not. Another surge of pride fills my chest and my cock twitches in approval.

She shakes her head.

I'm ready to blow my load, and if Mattie isn't up for round three then I'll see if I can get the fucker to be patient. But my cock is having none of it. After months of abstinence, I'm the hardest I've ever been, the veins are standing out and my head is dripping in anticipation.

I stroke her still engorged clit and ask, "Are you ready for orgasm number three?"

She drops her thighs apart as an invitation, and gestures for me to come closer. I shift up the bed, so I am hovering above her and bend down to capture her lips. My beard is soaked with her juices and when our lips meet, she can taste herself.

"You like how you taste, babe?" My cock rubs against her stomach and another pearl of precum makes an appearance. Fuck, my cock is practically weeping at the thought of being inside this woman.

She nods, "And I want to feel you inside me, I don't think I have ever wanted anyone as much as I want you right now."

I grip my shaft and stroke the head of my cock along her slit, she's wet with her juices and my cock just slides along her pussy lips. I shiver and try and hold on, but my balls are tight,

and I don't know how long I can last. But no matter, later I'll show her that my dick can give her hours of pleasure.

"You ready for me?"

She nods, and all at once the head of my cock is at her weeping core. I slowly slip it inside, her tight pussy is gripping my shaft and I hiss as my piercing is tugged, it feels so fucking good.

The moment I start pushing, I know it's gonna be a tight fit. I rock my way inside slowly, an inch at a time, as Mattie breathlessly moans my name. When I'm fully inside her, she wraps her legs around me and rests her hands on my shoulders.

"I'm ready if you are," she murmurs.

I lean my forehead against hers and whisper, "I've been ready since the very first moment I set eyes on you."

"Then let's go," she whispers back.

When I pull almost all the way out, the world shifts beneath my feet. Her juicy pussy hugs my cock so damn tight I'm worried that I might come with my first thrust. The sensation of her soft, wet cunt is more than pleasure. It is rapture, sheer ecstasy.

I set a firm pace and love it when she starts writhing beneath me. Her head thrashes back and forth, and her nails dig into my skin. I guess she's feeling exactly what the piercing can do, as I move slowly, her g-spot is being rubbed. I circle my hips for a few strokes and then pick up the pace and watch her reactions.

When I'm close to coming, I reach down and press my thumb over her clit and rub it gently. Her response is both immediate and powerful. Her body clenches around my cock so tight I can hardly move. And then we both explode together. I stop moving as her pussy milks my still twitching cock so dry my balls ache.

Mattie tightens her legs around me in an unspoken invitation to stay locked inside her. I love being sheathed in her tight, wet pussy, and there is no chance of me going soft

with her tender flesh caressing my cock every time she moves her hips.

“Want a double dose of me? I can go again.”

“I feel like I can’t come down, like I’m on the edge of coming over and over again,” she gasps, and I feel her walls gripping my shaft. This is what I’ve been looking for my entire life and if I didn’t have to eat or sleep, then I’d spend the rest of my days balls deep in this woman.

This time, I’ll last longer, I pull out slowly, still keeping my cock head sheathed in her and I can feel her flesh teasing my shaft from all directions. I groan at the intensity of the pleasure. Whatever is going on between us is like nothing I’ve ever felt before. I begin a slow pace that escalates until I’m fucking her like I own her, my cock wet with her arousal and my come.

My hand drifts down and I gently rub my thumb over her swollen, wet clit as I rail her. Pulling out again until just the tip is inside her. I can tell she likes that, because she props up on one elbow to watch my glistening cock move in and out of her pussy.

“You like the way we look together, sugar?”

She nods, never taking her eyes off where our bodies are joined together.

“You gonna come for me again? I want to feel you squirt over my cock.” I start circling my hips in a motion I know is gonna send her wild.

I press my thumb down on her clit and she comes apart under me. Her legs unwrap, jerking and trembling as she orgasms, her juices coating my cock. The clench of her tight, wet heat makes me come, filling her to overflowing with my hot seed and I fuck it deep as she’s screaming and moaning my name. I slow my thrusting and pull out, there was a gush of our comingled juices, and pride surges once more in my chest when I realize just how wet she can get for me. My lips find hers and we kiss again, leisurely and contented.

She moves over and snuggles against my chest. Having her close makes me feel like I've given her as much pleasure and happiness as she gave me.

I smooth her hair back out of her face and gave her a kiss on the forehead. "You realize I'm not gonna let you go now. You know that, right?"

"I don't know if there's anywhere I'd rather be." Mattie murmurs sleepily.



## Chapter 13

### *Mattie*

I wake up sprawled over Rigs' big body. The room is chilly but he's warm, so I cuddle up closer to him. One of his arms comes out and he pulls me closer. He doesn't say anything and I'm not even sure he's awake. His movement seemed almost like an automatic response. One that made me the happiest woman alive.

I smile against his chest as I think about all the great sex we had last night. My sweet biker wasn't joking when he said he wanted to worship my body like I deserved. He feasted on me and then some. I get aroused just thinking about the way his devilish tongue slid against my clit. I've never had a man make me squirt, must less get off on it. I didn't even know I was capable of it, but last night I went to new heights. Rigs was a pro when it came to sex, a part of me had a flash of jealousy when I thought about all the other women he must have pleased with his spectacular cock over the years. But then I remember what he'd told me when I first arrived, about wanting to settle down. Maybe he really could fall for me? Because I sure as hell was falling for him. There was an age difference, but that man was like a fine wine, and I was certainly reaping the rewards of his years of experience.

Rigs didn't rush anything. He ignored his own straining cock to make sure I was pleased. I shifted feeling the delicious ache between my thighs, that sensation that showed I'd been well and truly fucked.

His deep voice cuts through my filthy reminisces, "You keep squirming around this morning and I'm going to fuck you into the bed."

"Don't threaten me with a good time," I tease him back.

"Aren't you scared of being forced to take my ginormous cock first thing in the morning?"

It was amusing that he used the term forced. “I don’t think you’d ever have to force a woman who’d caught a glimpse of your best feature.”

He chuckles, “Do you think my cock’s my best feature, or are you just teasing me for saying that to lure you into bed with me?”

“Maybe a little from column A and a little from column B,” I respond as I trace two fingers down his happy trail. “I don’t know if your cock is impressive because it’s ginormous or because it just looks more prominent because of the manscaping.”

“Maybe it’s like you said, a little from column A and a little from column B.”

I think of the one thing I know will immediately turn him on. “I loved feeling your cock stretch my tight pussy.”

I hear him gasp, so I keep up the sexy talk. “Last night when you came inside me, I could tell you were filling me up with your seed. Filling me up to over-flowing actually. It must be because of those big balls of yours.”

“Fuck, woman. You do not play fair.” He slides down the bed. “Open up woman. I want to lick you until you come screaming my fucking name.”

I lock my knees together and shake my head. “No way. We’ve got things to do. We can’t lie around in bed all day having sex.”

He glances up at me with a concerned look on his face. “Was I too much. I didn’t want to be greedy with your pretty little pussy but every time I got a taste, I just wanted more.”

I reach down to cup the side of his face. “Did you hear me screaming at you to stop?”

A slow grin spreads over his handsome face. “No, I did not. Quite the opposite in fact.

I press my knees tighter together.

“I’m waiting for permission to lick your pretty pussy and put my cock inside you. Is this a no, or are you still thinking it

over?”

“You didn’t say the magic word,” I tease.

He opens his mouth, but before he can speak there’s a loud banging on our door.

“Fuck off, it’s too early,” Rigs shouts.

“It’s ten a.m. and Zen wants to talk to right away. He’s got a lead on that assistant coach you wanted to talk to.”

Rigs flings himself onto his back and stares up at the ceiling. “Cockblocked by work,” he grumbles.

He looks so miserable, and his cock is all swollen and almost purple.

“Let’s see if I can take care of your little problem and send you off with a smile on your face,” I lean over and slowly circle my tongue around the tip of his cock then take the head into my mouth. To say he’s shocked would be an understatement. This man is dumbfounded. I wrap my hand around the bottom of his shaft, trying to cover as much of his length as possible.

His hand comes out to gather my hair and holds it back. “God, that feels good, Mattie. You’ve a generous woman and I won’t forget this kindness.”

I flick my tongue against his piercing, making it jiggle which elicits a gasp from him, then I hollow out my cheeks, sucking him as I stroke in long jerky movement, much like I saw him giving himself last night. His words turn into groans of pleasure and just as my jaw starts to get tired, he says, “Pull off if you don’t want to taste me, darlin’.”

Instead of pulling back I take him deeper into my throat. He comes instantly. When he gushes into my mouth, there is just too much to swallow. It floods my mouth and drips down over my lips and the length of his cock. I ease him down and clean him up with my tongue, he tastes salty and delicious, and I can’t get enough.

“Oh fuck, Mattie. You have no idea how good that felt.”

I threw my arms around his neck and gave him a hug. “If it was half as good as how your mouth felt on me, I’m thrilled for you.”

“You’re the most amazing woman to ever hit my bed. I’m so glad you gave us a chance.”

“Me to, baby.”

“Now, you’re making me not want to get out of bed again. Pretty words and deeds like that should be rewarded.”

I give him a quick kiss and said, “You can reward me tonight, assuming I’m still able to walk.”

“I ain’t never damaged a woman with my cock, and I don’t plan to start with the woman of my dreams.”

“You always say the sweetest things, we’d better get out of bed before we get distracted again.”

I crawl over him and jump out of bed. I was about to head to the restroom, but I lose my footing and stumble. I forget that sometimes my legs get a bit weak and then I’m reminded about my MS. He catches me with one strong arm and steadies me on my feet.

“Sorry about that,” I say, embarrassed that he saw me like that. After being unceremoniously dumped after my diagnosis, I’m always scared that once any man sees a sign of weakness they’ll run off.

“Mattie, never apologize for things you can’t help. You will always be perfect in my eyes—you forget I’ve been in the military and seen men get life changing injuries. Having a disability doesn’t define a person. I want you in my life on your good days and bad. Nothing could detract from your desirability or my respect for you, most of all something like that.”

I press my mouth together to keep my lips from trembling. “Thank you for understanding that I’m more than my MS.”

He shrugs his big shoulders. “It’s only fair. I’m more than my foot in mouth disease and you overlooked that perfectly fine.”

I burst out laughing at his self-effacing humor.

“Let’s get our showers over with as quickly as possible so we don’t leave my club brother waiting any more than necessary.”

I agreed and we did just that. Temptation was hard to resist but we managed. We grab a cup of coffee and go to meet with their club’s IT specialist. The man’s name is Zen, after meeting him I think I know how he came by that nickname, the man is so laid back he’s practically horizontal.

Rigs asks, “I hear you got something on William Winslow.”

“Yeah, I did. He worked at Las Salinas High School for a total of three years. As far as I can tell he must have gotten laid off About eight months ago because he started collecting unemployment shortly after.”

“Okay, that in itself is suspicious, he lost his job around the same time Evan went missing. Do you have any addresses for him?”

“You know that I do. He’s currently living in a one-bedroom apartment on the east side of town. As far as I can tell unemployment ran out three months ago. I’m not showing any visible means of employment for him.”

“This is all pretty strange. Did you find anything else on him?”

“I ran a background check, but it came back clean. There were no prior arrests, not even a parking ticket. It’ll be interesting to hear what he has to say about losing his job. As hard as teachers are to come by around here, I can’t imagine they would just lay one off out of the blue.”

Zen’s not wrong about that. Teachers are scarce on the ground in Las Salinas, as well as just about every other town in California. The fact that he had been claiming unemployment suggested that he had actually been laid off, because if he’d been fired or quit, then he wouldn’t have qualified.

I wait patiently as Rigs and Zen chat back and forth about the assistant coach. I have to admit it feels like this case is

finally coming together. If I could just find one of the kids then the whole process might start to unravel, I guess I was hoping for some kind of domino effect.

When Rigs finishes talking to his club brother we go to his office. He starts scrolling through this phone to pull up directions, and I start making quick notes about what we had discovered so far. Every detail I could remember went down on paper. I should have done this last night the minute we got back to the clubhouse, while it was all still fresh in my mind, but the surprise attack totally derailed my train of thought. I'm nowhere near finished when Rigs looks up and asks, "Do you wanna get breakfast right now our after we interview Winslow?"

"After," I say. "I don't want to waste any time getting to him, because if he's not there we'll have to look for him. I don't get a day off very often and I don't want it to go to waste."

"Fair enough. We might as well get going. I'm not having my woman going hungry though, I'll grab a couple of muffins and see if the prospects can wrap us some bacon. That should keep us going until lunch."

I smile to myself at his thoughtfulness.

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We jump on his motorcycle and head toward the east side of town. Again, I'm reminded how refreshing it is to be on the back of Rigs' motorcycle. I don't think anyone could be stressed if they were riding a Harley. The seats are comfortable, and the ride is smooth, so I lean into my man and enjoy the scenery.

Rigs pulls into an apartment complex, and we search for Winslow's home. When we find his first-floor end unit Rigs knocks on the door. When no one answers he knocks again. Just when I think no one is going to answer, someone finally opens it. The man has clearly just gotten out of bed. His hair is disheveled, and there's stubble along his otherwise clean-shaved jawline. He's wearing a t-shirt and a pair of dark pajama pants. "Yeah, what do you need?" He states gruffly.

“Good morning, my name is Matilda Mathews and I’m with child protective services. My partner, Mr. Kowalski, and I are making our final report on the disappearance of Evan White. If you don’t mind, we’d like to ask you some questions.”

“Yeah. Come on in,” he says as he steps back from the door. “Can I get you some coffee or anything?”

“No, thank you Mr. Winslow. I don’t want to take up anymore of your time than necessary.”

We sit down on his sofa, and he sits across from us. “I’m really disappointed that Evan hasn’t been found when I heard he was missing I looked everywhere I could think of, but had no luck.”

That was interesting, I thought Winslow was just the assistant coach, but it sounds like he was close to Evan. “When was the last time you saw him?”

“I believe it was April, seventh. I got a call from him saying he was in trouble and needed someone to talk to. I met him at the end of the school day, and he showed up with a black eye.”

I lean forward. “Did he say what happened?”

“Yeah, he said his foster dad clocked him for not keeping his room clean. They got into a disagreement, and he said things escalated.”

“Did you call the police or CPS?” As a teacher this man should have known that if there were any signs of child abuse then that had to be reported.

“Sometimes Evan lied about stuff. The bruise looked old.” He pauses and looks embarrassed. “Coach Strawn is a good coach, I really don’t think he would have hit him.”

I nod, I still think he should have reported it, but I continue asking questions. “Did Evan have regular disagreements with him?”

“Yeah, Coach Strawn is kind of a hot head. His heart is in the right place, but he loses his cool at times.”

“So was Evan violent a lot?”

“No, of course not. Why would you think that?”

“When we interviewed Mr. Strawn, he said that you gave bad reports about Evan being aggressive and not following directions.”

“Alright, I wasn’t going to say anything, but Strawn is an asshole. He’s always yelling and screaming at the players. Most of them are terrified of him. Evan was about the only one who stood up to him and as you can imagine that didn’t go well for him.”

“So, you didn’t report he was aggressive?”

“No. In addition to being an asshole, Strawn was a control freak. He never let me interact with the players. I was just a glorified towel boy. I did notice that he was ten times harder on Evan than any of the others. I always wondered if that was because of the animosity between the two of them or because Strawn felt like he had to be harder on Evan to keep from being accused of favoritism.”

“What do you think happened to Evan?”

The younger man rubbed his jawline as he thought it over. “I don’t know. He was a troubled kid, but I always found him pleasant. In the weeks before he was sent to the facility, he seemed withdrawn.”

Rigs speaks up for the first time, “How did you learn he was missing?”

“Strawn came in one day, pissed that someone from CPS had been out to see him. Evan had been gone for three months and apparently when they did a welfare check there was no record of the kid ever arriving at the facility. They wanted to see if he’d returned to his foster home.”

“You said you looked everywhere for him but didn’t find him. Where did you look?” Rigs asks.

Winslow rubs his forehead for a brief moment. “Evan was interested in all kinds of things, like music, choir, and theatre. He liked anything that kept him busy after school. Because of his conflict with Coach Strawn, he didn’t like to be at home. He’d sometimes come and see me for advice.”



“What did you tell him?” Rigs asks.

“Just the normal stuff. Stay out of his way, follow the rules and do all the thousand and one things the Strawn demanded of him. I swear the kid was in a no-win situation.”

“Coach Strawn thought Evan might be trying to get back to his old home in the hopes that his grandmother might return from the nursing home when she got back on her feet.”

“No. Evan was well aware that his grandmother would never be coming out of the nursing home. She was bedridden and incontinent. He was pretty torn up about being taken away from her. But going back was never an option. He knew that because he helped clear out her house the week before CPS got the call that he was couch surfing.”

Rigs asks him another pertinent question, “Why were you laid off of your job at Las Salinas High?”

“I wasn’t laid off. My position was a grant funded position that was only supposed to be for one year, but it got renewed an additional two years. I had a good run of it and ended up with experience and a good solid job reference, so that worked out well for me.”

My curiosity gets the better of me. “Teachers are in short supply. How is it that you’re having a hard time finding employment?”

“I’m not a teacher. I’m a sports medicine tech. The only job I had at the school was working with the sports teams. I never taught there.” He frowns. “Sorry, I don’t seem to have reliable information on what happened to Evan. He’s a good kid and deserves better than the raw hand life dealt him.”

I come to my feet and Rigs follows suit. “Well, you’ve actually been a great help. Thank you for talking to us today. We’re doing our best to track down what happened to Evan.”

“Good luck with your investigation. If you need anything else from me, just let me know.”

Rigs and I walk out of Winslow’s apartment more bewildered than ever. We don’t even talk about it. We just get on his bike and take off.

# Chapter 14

## *Rigs*

Instead of going back to the clubhouse, we stop at the local pub for a bite to eat. Once we are sitting at a quiet table in the corner and have given our order, Mattie gets the conversation ball rolling.

“What if Evan was kidnapped and instead of reporting his abduction to the police, his former case worker and his foster father arranged for a fake transfer?”

“Yeah, I see where you’re going with that.” I respond. “But in order for that to work they would still have had to have another accomplice at the facility he was supposed to be admitted to, right?” “Yeah, that’s a lot of people all conspiring together to make one teen disappear. Maybe it’s like Strawn said, Evan ran away. I guess it’s possible that his case worker and Strawn didn’t want to get blamed, particularly if there was abuse going on. The foster father could have been prosecuted and the case worker could have lost his license.”

“That still leaves a third conspirator at the long-term care facility,” I point out. “Why would they risk their job by participating in such a farce? Unless they are related to Strawn or the case manager, I can’t anyone getting involved in covering up the disappearance of a teen.”

Our server brings our food and drinks. I take a sip of my iced tea as I roll the situation around in my mind. I know Mattie is doing the same.

Her face lights up, “Don’t you think it’s strange that the case worker from CPS ending up leaving around the same time Evan went missing?”

“Yes. It’s suspicious, though there might be an explanation for it, like with Winslow. We need to track that person down and have a talk with him.”

Mattie asks, “What if the case worker and the employee at the long-term care facility are one in the same person?”

“I read the file. The CPS case worker who collected him was Charles Boyles and the man who signed at the care facility was an Alvin Clarke. There were no photographs, but the names are different,” I point out, before taking a gigantic bite of my bacon cheeseburger. The food is really good here and I’m starving.

“Yeah, but names can change, we should get Zen to check them out. See if he can pull ID photos or something,” she insists.

Without giving me an opportunity to answer, she continues. “If there’s one thing I’ve learned from dealing with people, it’s to never underestimate the general stupidity of people trying to cover up a situation they’ve screwed up. I’ve had employees tell whoppers to get out of being terminated. All our case workers are licensed. If their license got suspended for gross negligence, they wouldn’t even be able to earn a living, put food on their table or keep a roof over their heads.”

“Alright, sugar. I’ll admit that’s a possibility. But wouldn’t the employee still have the same social security number, driver’s license number and still own the same vehicle?”

She grudgingly nods. “He might trade out his vehicle in an effort to get rid of a link to his former life. But the social security number and driver’s license number would remain the same. Unless they got a fake ID, but I don’t know how easy that is in real life.”

I had been eating throughout her entire explanation and throw the last bite of burger into my mouth and wash it down with another drink of tea. “We’ll have Zen look into it. A thorough background check should tell us if there are commonalities in former addresses, schooling and even if the name on their professional license changed in the last year. It’s a longshot but definitely worth looking into.”

“Thank you,” she says with a brilliant smile.

“What about his case supervisor at CPS, you said she left too?” I ask.

“Margo Cummings? She’d been with us for ages, I think she started at the agency around the time Anita was there.”

I take another mouthful of sweet tea, “Yeah, but my money is still on Evan being kidnapped rather than running away. The syndicate has been way too interested in you. I think it might be because your investigation is getting a little too close for comfort.”

“Well, they already know that Cleo and I are associated with the Savage Legion. They know your club is responsible for bringing down their regional kingpins. They know for sure that Cleo was working to find the missing kids, because she and Siege actually recovered one child. And if they were bugging my apartment, they would have heard Cleo and I discussing the cases.”

“Something about this doesn’t feel right to me though. I get the feeling we’re overlooking a critical piece of information, maybe something that would lead us to the person in charge of the whole operation. We need to find out who’s in charge before he begins setting up new regional managers or moves business elsewhere. Right now, their organization is hobbled and that gives us the advantage. My gut tells me that window is closing.”

Mattie puts her half-eaten turkey sandwich down. “I think we need to clarify something here. My primary focus is on finding the missing children, not figuring out and taking down the leader of the syndicate.”

I open my mouth to object to her train of thought, but she lifts her chin in way that communicates that I should not interrupt her, so I don’t dare. “I’m not saying that taking down the syndicate should be put on the back burner until the kids are found because then I’ll just be chasing new missing kids when they reorganize. But I can’t stop now, when I’m so close.”

“I didn’t say you should stop, but my club is dedicating a lot of manpower to taking down the syndicate. I can’t turn my

back on that mission.”

That’s fine,” she shoots back. “But you called me up out of the blue and volunteered to help me with my mission. Are you banking out on me?”

“No, of course not. I’d never let you down. I agreed to be your protector and to help you find those kids. That’s exactly what I intend to do, but I’m also looking for Pope.”

“Good,” she says. “Just so you know, if our missions turn out to collide, as far as I’m concerned, it will be a happy coincidence.”

“So if we stumble on a lead, you’re not adverse to us following up if it’s time sensitive or passing the information to my club president if it’s not, right?”

“Absolutely, I want to see that bastard behind bars as much as anyone else. I just don’t want to get pulled away from locating and rescuing kids.”

“Alright, sugar. We’re in agreement.”

“I’m pleased you’re still going to be helping me. Truth be told, I’m not sure I can do this without you.”

I lean over and give her a kiss on the forehead.

My phone jingles. It’s Siege, so I answer right away. “What’s up, boss?”

He responds quickly. “We need you at the bar in town. Hellfire Hounds is shooting up the place and Mel got injured. How close are you?”

“I’m only a few minutes away but I’ve got Mattie with me.”

“I hate to say this, but leave her where she is and get to the bar. You’re the closest brother to right now and Mel’s life may depend upon you getting there ASAP.”

I press my lips into a firm line as I think it over for a minute or two. I don’t want to leave Mattie’s side when those syndicate bastards are after her—but my club needs me, and

she'll be safe here. "Alright, I think she'll be okay in a public place for a while. I'll head to the bar right away."

"We're on our way, so you'll soon have backup."

The phone goes dead as I get to my feet. "Sorry, sugar."

Before I can finish Mattie shoos me away with one hand. "Go ahead. I heard what Siege said. Go save Mel, I'll be right here when you get finished."

I hesitate for just a second and glance around the restaurant. "Okay, just don't leave. As long as you're in a public place, you should be safe. I'll be back as soon as I can. Any trouble, call me."

Without waiting for her to reply, I rush out of the restaurant, jump on my bike and head to our club's bar about five blocks away. I have a concealed carry permit and am always packing.

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When I pull up at the bar, I see five motorcycles. A couple have Hellfire Hounds panted on the fuel tank. Thankfully, their club president's bike is not among them. I would recognize King's bike anywhere because it has a crown logo embroidered on his leather seat. It looks like Siege was right about who was causing trouble. The blinds are pulled down and the closed sign is showing in the door. Fuckers. They had better not have hurt our favorite bartender.

I run down the side alley and use my key to get in through the back door. I can hear someone grumbling and breaking bottles in our basement. I rush forward and gently close the trap door in the floor, then throw the lock. I'll deal with that dumbass later. Assuming the number of bikes match bodies that one of five down.

I slide into the kitchen, and the door to the walk-in freezer is standing wide open. I can hear someone rummaging around inside. These stupid fucks are making it easy for me today. I sneak across the room, shut the door and lock it. I turn and head toward the bar, making a mental note to pull him out first so he doesn't freeze to death. That would definitely play havoc

with the health inspectors, not less poor Mel when she went to grab some frozen fries.

I peer around the corner and find one guy with his gun lying down on the counter and his back turned to me. He's so busy pilfering money from the till, he doesn't hear me approach. He only realizes I'm behind him when I snatch his gun up at the same time as my fucking phone jingles. I press the nozzle of my gun into his back, right about where his heart is. "Freeze, you stupid fucker, or I swear to God I'll blow a hole right through your chest."

He freezes all right, right after he screams at one of the two men hovering over Mel. "Heads up, Scrapper. We have an intruder."

Both of them spin around and go for their guns. I shoot one with my hostage's gun as I grind my gun into the man I have pinned between me and register. Fucking bastards, that's what I get for not blowing the asshole's head off the moment I saw him at the till. Before I can take aim at the other man he goes running right through the front door, tearing it off the hinges in his panic to escape my dodgy left-handed shot. His buddy is on the floor, and I missed him by a mile. Back in the old days we'd shoot first, ask questions later, but now we try and keep the bodies from piling up in town.

"Was that Scrapper? If so, he can run pretty fast. He almost left a man shaped hole in the door on his way out."

"Fuck off. King is going to put your nuts in a vice for shooting Squirrely."

I shove his gun in my waist band, grab him by the neck and start frog marching him into the bar area. "Scrapper, Squirrely? What chicken shit doles out names at your club? Let me guess, your club name is Squiffy?"

"Fuck all the way off. I'm not telling you a damn thing," he gritted out.

Using the butt of my handgun, I hit him on the back of the head, hard enough to make him see stars. "That's all right. I'm sure we'll figure it out."

While I'm zip tying the small-time man of mystery to a chair, the one on the floor groans and tries to sit up. While I can punch a man out with both fists, with guns I was a strictly right-handed shot. Mel flies out of the chair they had her cornered in and kicks him in the head, sending him back to la-la land.

"Damn girl, are you okay?"

She's holding one arm against her body, but I don't see any blood. "They broke my arm. It hurts like hell. I need to get to a doctor, right goddamn now."

"Siege is on his way. The second he gets here, we'll take you to the emergency room."

"No getting fixed up by Doc, right?"

I shake my head as I tighten the last zip tie. "No man, only the best for our favorite bartender."

She stumbles over to me and plops down at a nearby table. I had to admit, she looked pretty exhausted. "It looks like I'm going to be the fucking one-armed bartender for a while."

I drag the guy I shot up from the floor and rip off his shirt to use as a compress to stem the bleeding from his stomach. Gut wounds are hell. I need him to live along enough for Siege to interrogate him. Once I hand him over, he's no longer my problem.

I tie the shirt down firmly with my belt and zip tie his feet together and his hands in front of him because I'm not an irredeemable bastard.

I wipe the blood off my hands on a pile of napkins sitting on another table. I squat down in front of her. "You sure it's broken, girl?"

Her jaw is locked but she nods and shifts uncomfortably in the seat. "Yeah, it feels awful."

I go over the bar and grab a tablecloth, rip it into wide pieces and then find a zipper bag and shovel a couple of scoops of ice into it. Returning to Mel, I lay my supplies on the table and break open a plastic napkin dispenser to use as a



splint. “I’m going to splint your arm because when you move around if it’s not stabilized it might do more damage. Is that okay?”

She gives me a weak nod. “Yeah, just do it already.”

It was kind of obvious where the bone was broken, so I fit the two plastic pieces on either side and began wrapping the dark blue tablecloth strips around it. After I gently tie it off, I make a sling to go around her neck, seal the ice bag and lay it against her arm with my blood-stained fingers. It’s not the first time I’ve done field first aid on someone I know, and sadly I know it won’t be the last.

Just then Siege, Tank and Dutch come storming through the door with their guns drawn. Siege takes one look around the room and asks, “What the fuck is going on here? There are four bikes outside and I only see two Hounds.”

I stand up and gesture toward the door. “There were five of them but one got away.”

“Clearly. He tore the fucking door off the hinges.” I grumbled.

“What about the other two?” Siege says, looking around at the damage.

“Oh fuck,” I said as panic surges in my chest. “I locked one in the walk in. He’s probably a popsicle by now.”

As Siege, Dutch, and I run to the kitchen, Tank stopped to see to Mel. “Just hang in there, girl. We’ll get you out of here in two shakes of a lamb’s tail,” I heard him say.

She choked out a laugh. “Don’t make me laugh. It hurts.”

I open the door to the walk-in and look inside. Sure enough there was a Hound and he was shaking on the floor. “Let’s get him the fuck outta here.”

Dutch and I get on either side of him and do a two person carry. Once we get him out to the front, he’s zip-tied to a chair like his buddy. I grab a couple of tablecloths and wrap them around him.

“What’s this? Pitying the bastard?” Tank says.

I shake my head. “Not after what they’ve done to Mel. But if we want to interrogate him it’s no good if he’s got hypothermia.”

Turning back to Siege, I say, “The other one thought it would be a great idea to pilfer through our stock room.”

“Let me guess, you locked him down in the cellar, right?”

I rub the back of my neck, slightly embarrassed. “Well, it was five to one and I definitely wasn’t trying to make easy things hard.”

“I can see that,” Siege says as he unlocks the lock using the key I left in place.

He calls down. “Look, I don’t know which Hound you are, but all your buddies are dead, injured or ran away like the yellow-bellied cowards they are. You need to come out with your hands in the air because if we have to come down there and drag you out, we’re gonna shoot first and ask questions later.”

“Fuck off, assholes,” is the only response we get.

I frown at Siege. “That’s all these fuckers ever say and I’m about sick of it.”

Dutch shouts down at the man, lying his ass off, “Look you fucking imbecile, there are a dozen of us up here and more on the way. You don’t have enough bullets to shoot your way out of this situation. Get your ass up here before you piss us off entirely.”

“Fucking fine. I’m coming up.”

“I want to see your hands in the air, and I better not catch sight of a fucking gun.”

“You won’t. My club will pay a ransom for me. I’m important.”

When his head pops up, I almost laugh. It’s a kid, probably not even eighteen, with dark hair and brown eyes. “That’s strange. You don’t look important,” I comment.

Siege grabs him by the hand and hauls him to his feet. “He is to King.” Glancing to the kid he asks, “How’s your grandfather these days, Gene.”

The younger man flashes him a proud smile. “I got patched in. My club name is Tracker.”

“Ain’t that special,” Siege flings back. “Want to tell me why you and your buddies broke into the Legion’s bar and hurt our bartender?”

“Yeah, that wasn’t my idea.” When none of us replied, he adds, “It was all Scrapper. He said if we fucked up the Legion’s bar everyone in our club would know we have balls of solid brass.”

Siege promptly knees him in the groin and the kid doubles over in pain. I have to admit I saw that one coming. The kid shoves himself up from the floor still grimacing. “Yeah, I guess I deserved that one.”

“Which one of you broke our bartender’s fucking arm?”

The kid looks absolutely disgusted. “That was Squirrely. I don’t think he meant to. He’s just big and doesn’t know his own strength.”

“Well, he ended up with bullet for his trouble.”

“Shit, we need to call my grandpa and get Squirrely to our club medic.”

Siege looks him in the eye. “Son, it’s a gut wound. He’s gonna need a real ER and very soon, or things are going to get ugly for him.” Siege glares at me, “Why did you shoot him in the gut? You need glasses, old man?”

I glare back at him, “I had one gun on the idiot who was rifling through the till, I had to shoot him left-handed. And none of that old man shit, I’m only ten years older than you.”

There’s moaning coming from across the room, so we stop our good-natured ribbing and look.

“Shit, can I go ahead and call an ambulance?” Tracker asks, looking panicked.

“Negative. Your club is not going to want the cops arresting the lot of you, and if you go to jail, I can’t pick you up every now and then and beat on you for a while. Do you catch my drift?”

Tracker nods. “Yeah, every time we listen to Scrapper and something bad happens my old man says it’s the worst decision of my life. He’s definitely going to say that again.” Tracker scratches his head and adds, “This was an apeshit crazy idea even by Scrapper’s standards and we were stupid for going along with him.”

“Yeah, you were.” Siege’s arm bolts out and he grabs Tracker by the collar of his worn-out t-shirt. “Here’s how we’re going to handle this. We’re going to drop you and Squirrely off at the ER along with another of your guys who accidentally got locked in the freezer too long. You’re going to tell them that Squirrely was cleaning his gun and accidentally dropped it and shot himself in the gut. I don’t know, maybe while you were trying to get him sorted, your other friend accidentally locked himself in your club’s freezer unit.”

“We don’t have freezer big enough for a person to fit in,” Tracker points out.

Siege gives him a little shake. “Pay attention. It doesn’t matter what you tell them as long as they buy that it was an accident. If you’ve been drinking tonight that will help sell the story.”

“Got it. Man, shit just got real.”

I watch as Siege explains the consequences for this young man. “You and your friends cost me a good bartender. You’re going to make that up by tending my bar every single night until she can return to work. If that doesn’t happen then we come for your old man and grandfather first. Got it?”

Tracker nods grimly. “Yeah, I got it.”

Siege adds, “And don’t be showing up at my bar in a Hellfire Hounds cut.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Tell King that this is the price of keeping the lot of you from being arrested for breaking and entering and battery of our bartender. Our security cameras picked up everything. It’s how we knew to come today.”

The kid immediately looked around suspiciously. “We didn’t see any cameras.”

“I’ll send King a clip later to verify. Meanwhile our van should be outside by now. Tank will be taking our bartender to the ER. Don’t sit by him, talk to him or even acknowledge him. Alright?”

“Yeah, I get what you’re laying down. You’re almost as much of a hard ass as my grandpa.”

“I’ll take that as a fucking compliment. Now get your ass moving.”

The kid jogs out to the bar area and the moment he is out of hearing range, I comment, “That sounded like you’re trying to make nice with Hellfire Hounds. What’s going through your head on this one, boss.”

“Nothing close to a truce with the Hounds, that’s for fucking sure. We don’t have time for a pissing contest with King and his club over honor and pride stuff right now. We’ve got bigger fish to fry. Our attention needs to stay firmly on tracking and fucking destroying the syndicate leader. That has to be our one and only focus. We can deal with the Hounds any old day.”

“Smart move. “I need to get back to Murphy’s. I don’t want Mattie being on her own too long, ya know?”

“Yeah, I do. Thanks for jumping up and coming here on such short notice. It probably saved Mel from a lot more pain and misery.”

“Happy to do it. Do you need me to lock the bar up?”

“No, you get back to Mattie. I’ll take care of the bar.”

## Chapter 15

### *Mattie*

I can't help but worry about Rigs as I sit picking at my turkey sandwich and fries. The server refills my drink and give a faint smile. I can't help but wonder if she thinks I've been dumped by my date. It would explain the pity looks she keeps giving me after Rigs ran off. "Can I get you some pie or cake?"

"No thanks. I can barely hold this," I tell her.

"Let me know if you need anything else, honey," she says brightly as she lays down the check.

I pick up a fry and nibble on the end, feeling dread pooling in the pit of my stomach. I pull out my phone to see if I have any messages from Rigs yet. While I'm looking at the screen, my phone jingles. It's an unknown caller. Thinking that maybe he's calling me from the bar phone, I quickly take the call. "Hello, Rigs is that you?"

"No ma'am. My name is Charlie Boyles. I got a call last night from Mr. Strawn, I'm Evan White's former case worker. I have a lead for you."

"Great," I say enthusiastically. "What do you have?"

"Not over the phone. Can you meet me over in Bolder?"

I know where Bolder is. It's about ten minutes away from Las Salinas, that's if I had my car. "I don't have transport at the moment. Maybe we can meet up later tonight."

"No, it has to be now. I'm going out of town."

"Alright. I'll call someone to pick me up."

"No. I'll only talk to you. I only trust other people in our field. We have a license to protect, so I know you'll hear me out and deal honestly with me."

“Okay, let me think for a minute. I’m at Murphy’s Bar and Grill right now.”

“I’m actually five minutes away. I’ll pick you up. We can talk while I drive, and I’ll drop you off anywhere you want afterwards.”

Memories of Rigs warning me to stay put rise in my mind. We had Zen pull up pictures of him and Alvin Clarke, the man at the facility who’d signed for Evan. They definitely weren’t the same person, while I had never seen Clarke before, I vaguely recalled Boyles. He had worked in another department at CPS and there was nothing suspicious found on him. Unfortunately, Boyles is about to leave the area, God knows for how long. And he has a tip on Evan White. He sounds about as paranoid as a person would be if Evan’s disappearance was related to the syndicate in any way, maybe they got to him too and he’s running away like Robert did. Rob was my former colleague who was the first to realize something was up and had started to investigate the missing kids. Everyone had thought had gone rogue when he disappeared with Mina, the girl whose case worker he was, along with her mother.

I reluctantly make the decision to just go with it. “Alright, I’ll pay my bill and be waiting for you outside. What will you be driving?”

“A red Ford Focus. I’ll pull pup at the curve.”

I dash off a quick message to Rigs letting him know what’s happening. Minutes later I watch a red Focus pull up to the curb. I’m not totally lacking in common sense, so I’ve already decided that if there is anyone with him, I’m just going to nope out. I’m a fairly good judge of character, so I’ll go with my gut.

When he pulls up, I do recognize him. I remember meeting him in passing at the annual Christmas party. I’m still a bit unsure as to why he’s reached out now, but relief surges in my chest when I realize this clearly isn’t some sort of trap.

He reaches over and flips the handle on the passenger side door as he glances around anxiously. I pull the door open, slide

into the seat and shut the door. Placing my purse on the floor, I tell him, “Thanks for coming to meet me today.”

He motions to the seat belt and mumbles, “It’s okay. When Strawn called last night and gave me an earful, it got me thinking. If there’s anything I can do to help find Evan White, I would feel guilty not doing it. I still have my old contacts from CPS, that’s how I got your number.”

“If you don’t mind, I want to ask you a few questions.”

Pulling out of the parking lot and on to the highway, he adds, “I’m sure you do. This whole situation is screwed completely up.”

“I read in Evan’s file you dropped him off at a long-term care facility, one that specialized in treating aggressive youth.”

“I did what I was instructed to do by my supervisor. Margo Cummings arranged the placement. I was just the one tasked with taking him there.”

“Would you happen to know why the facility is now saying they never had him, even though someone there responded to our questions when we placed the thirty-day-review call?”

“Margo said he escaped doing some kind of therapeutic outing, six weeks after arriving. She resigned a couple of months later. To be honest I thought they had found him. Then Strawn called me, saying that Evan was missing. It freaked me out, so I started going through it all in my mind trying to unpack what happened.”

I know you’re heading out of town. I’m grateful that you care enough to help us try to figure out what went wrong. Maybe we need to contact the local police near the facility he escaped from, it could be they picked him up and something went wrong in the processing?”

Charlie nods his head thoughtfully, “After hearing that you were about to close Evan’s case I got to thinking. There was a place he liked to go down by the river. Evan was never into fishing or anything like that, but he told me he would go there, sit on the bank, watch the river flow and just think about his problems. I decided to go out and have a look at the site



myself. You know just make sure he wasn't camping out there or something."

"That makes sense." Charlie was a social worker. Naturally, this would be his thought process.

"There's some kind of fisherman's shack that looked like it had been built in the seventies. It was pretty dilapidated, but I found what could be some of Evan's possessions inside."

"This is the first hard lead we've had." I say excitedly. Maybe it was true, and Evan did run away?

"I'd like to take you there for a quick look. Are you willing to let me show you what I found? It's only about fifteen minutes away."

"Absolutely. If there is any way we can figure out what happened, I want to jump right on it."

"That's great. I know he had a lot of problems, but I believe that deep down inside he was a good kid."

I make a mental note that he said 'was' instead of 'is'. "Do you have some reason to believe that Evan might not have survived?"

He shoots me a nervous glance. "God no. Why would you ask something like that?"

"It was because you just refer to him in the past tense."

Charlie flinches slightly. "Yeah, that's just me misspeaking because I'm nervous about getting involved in all this again. Strawn said you were asking a bunch of questions about who picked Evan up, and I never showed an ID. I just want to be clear to everyone at this point, I followed the directions of my supervisor, kept strictly to departmental protocols, dropped the kid off where I was supposed to drop him off. I even got their signature as the receiver and added it to his file."

"Yeah, I read your note. Everything seemed to be in order on your end."

Charlie's shoulders relaxed a little. It hit me that this whole situation was less about him wanting to help find Evan, and

more about him wanting to cover his own ass.

“Do you mind if I ask what you’ve been doing with yourself since you left the agency?”

“To be quite honest working for CPS was getting overwhelming, I left to work with an intellectually disabled adult male. I’ve worked in that field before, and it’s much less stressful than trying to get children back with their asshole parents.”

His shitty description of family reunification really rubs me the wrong way. As a licensed professional he was supposed to understand the value of keeping families together. Lots of the parents we worked with desperately needed the kind of support our agency gave in order to keep their families together. It bothered me that this man clearly wasn’t batting for team CPS, or even the families he was tasked with helping.

I think long and hard about asking him to stop the car so I can get out. But in the end, I just can’t do it. Evan is out there somewhere. If there’s any chance at all I can find him, I’m going to take it.

I let that settle into the dark recesses of my mind as Charlie pulls off onto secondary road which soon turns into a dirt road. Now we’re in the middle of nowhere, he seems less concerned with conversation, and despite my earlier trust I can’t help thinking I made a bad decision to come here. After another five or so minutes driving, a river came into view, it had lazy rolling waters and if I wasn’t feeling so anxious, I might have found it pretty.

I look out my side window and started picking landmark, in case I need to walk out of here at some point. With any luck if I can make it to the highway, I just might be able to catch a ride back to town.

Within moments I see the shack Charlie mentioned earlier. It’s much smaller than I anticipated, and far shoddier. I hate it to think of Evan being forced to live in such a hovel. No one deserves to live this way, least of all an innocent fourteen-year-old child.

Charlie parks the car and opens the door, “If you follow me, I’ll show you what I found.”

Unlike when I first got into Charlie’s car, I have the worst gut feeling ever. But I’m already alone in the middle of nowhere, so I have nothing to lose. “Sure I’m eager to see if there’s anything that belongs to him and try to make an educated guess about how recently he was last here.”

When we get to the shack, Charlie says, “It’s unlocked, so we should be able to just go on in.”

That carries a note of finality I don’t like and the moment he pushes the door open and shoves me through roughly, I realize I should have listened to my gut. Evan is sitting on the splintered wooden floor, with a shackle around his ankle, looking much worse for wear. His hair is greasy, and he looks like he hasn’t had a bath in weeks. His eyes have a listless quality that worries me. The whole place smells strongly of urine and it’s clear he’s been here for weeks if not months.

Forgetting all about Charlie, I rush across the room and sit down in front of Evan. Putting my hand to his forehead I can tell that he’s burning with fever. I shove his hair out of his face with both hands. “Evan White. My name is Mattie and I’m with Child Protective Services. Can you speak to me?”

He croaks out the words, “Behind you. Move.”

I dodge to the side, narrowly missing a huge rusty shovel Charlie was swinging toward my head. Turning, I push myself up from the floor. “What the hell is wrong with you? Did you know Evan was here this whole time?”

“Of fucking course I knew he was here. Who do you think brought him here?”

“But why? What did he ever do to you?”

“Nothing, sometimes people just need to disappear. I’m the man that makes that happen.”

“I’m guessing this is a good paying gig for you.”

“You got that right. I make a year’s salary with one job, during the shit nobody else wants to do.”

“Why did you target me? I don’t understand?”

“That’s too damn bad because sharing time is over, bitch. You can either clamp the other shackle around your ankle or I can knock you the fuck out and do it myself.”

“Fine,” I say through gritted teeth.

He watched breathlessly as I click the shackle into place. Then his chin comes up in gesture of defiance. “I have to admit it gives me no small amount of satisfaction to see the woman who’s so used to giving orders following them for once.”

“Is that all this is to you, some crazy power trip. You don’t scare me Charlie. You can hurt me or kill me even. But I’ll die with a clear conscience, and I’ll come back to haunt you every damn step. When your room suddenly gets cold late at night, that’ll be me breathing the breath of death right in your face.”

He backed up quickly like he had been struck in the face. “Damn, you’re a creepy bitch.”

“So what’s the plan? Clearly whoever you work for wants us alive.” I nod in Evan’s direction. “They’re probably not going to be too happy to hear hostage number one is sick. He needs medical attention.”

“They don’t pay me to pamper the animals.”

“I’ve got money in my purse. Use it to get food and medicine for Evan. This is your opportunity to do the right thing and it won’t cost you a dime.”

“I might do that.” He grabs my purse, rummages through it for a few moments and pulls out my work phone and stuffs it in his pocket. “I’ll just go ahead and take this. You’re not going to need it.”

As he goes back to rifling through my purse, I think my lucky stars that he doesn’t know my personal cell phone is still in my back pocket, I can only hope Rigs doesn’t call right now. Eventually he pulls out my wallet, stuffs the cash in his pocket and begins picking through my credit cards. I doubt I would be lucky enough for him to use one of my credit cards,

though that might be enough for Rigs to zero in on our location once he realizes I'm missing.

"Don't move. I'll be right back," he says.

The minute he's out the door, I check on Evan. His head is hanging to one side and he's barely awake. I shake him. "Evan, you've got to stay awake. We're going to be rescued soon."

His eyes lift to mine. "Who are you again?"

"I'm a supervisor at CPS. I know it doesn't seem like it but I'm here to rescue you."

"Be careful. The walls have ears."

I swallow thickly and nod. He's telling me the place is bugged. "Try and stay awake Evan, hang in there."

"I'll...I'll try," he mumbles as his eyes drift closed again.

Holy shit. I ease out my cell phone and turn toward the wall to use it. Since I can't risk a conversation. I turn the volume all the way down, but not on vibrate. Then I start a text message.

***Me: I need your help.***

***Rigs: Anything you need.***

***Me: I got kidnapped by Evan's old social worker, Charlie.***

***Rigs: Are you okay? Did he hurt you?***

***Me: No. Fine. No time. He'll be back soon.***

***Rigs: Where are you?***

***Me: Run down shack by the river. I'm sending you my location.***

***Rigs: We're on our way.***

***Me: Bring a van. Found Evan. He's sick and needs to go to the hospital.***

***Rigs: Got it. Hang on. We're coming.***

***Me: Hurry. Don't know what he'll do when he returns.***

***Rigs: Stay calm. Looks like you're ten minutes away.***

*Me: Hurry. Please hurry.*

I hear someone outside and I put the phone away and turn back to Evan, just as Charlie stumbles through the door with several bags from one of the local gas stations. When he dumps the bags out on the floor in front of us and I see the acetaminophen, I grab the box and take out two of the capsules, placing them in Evan's mouth and help him wash them down with some blue Gatorade.

I quickly glance over at our captor. He has a strange, confused look on his face but I don't comment on it. Instead, I just say, "Thank you Charlie. I appreciate you helping me keep him alive."

"Regardless of what you think, I'm not a fucking monster. The syndicate contact thinks I killed Evan and buried him at the city dump. He knows stuff they don't want anyone finding out."

Shock roils through my gut. I wonder why Charlie has disobeyed Pope's direct orders and has been keeping Evan alive—does this mean he's on our side or theirs? I want to ask, but now isn't the best time. "Don't tell me they want me dead as well."

He shrugs. "The verdict still out on that. It was the same with Evan. They had me hold on to him and then told me to kill him three weeks later. They don't know about this shack." Making a disgruntled noise in the back of his throat, Charlie shakes his head. "Look, I don't even know why I fucking told you all that. Just know this, if the syndicate wants you dead, you're better off here than any other place."

"Got it. For what it's worth, thanks for not killing Evan."

"Yeah, I'm not wild about killing kids, especially when they're useful. Bossy supervisors are a whole different ball game though."

I stare up into his face, trying my best to figure this guy out. "Except, I was never your supervisor, much less a bossy one."

He just frowns. "Look, I've got to go. You should have enough food and drinks to hold you over for a day or two. I'll

get back out here as soon as I can.”

“Alright,” I say. “Just drive carefully. If anything happens to you, Evan and I are out of luck.”

Charlie barks a laugh. “I never really thought about it that way. Don’t worry about me, though. I’m like a cat who always lands on his feet.”

Watching him walk out the door, I don’t doubt that for a single minute. I can’t quite make him out, it’s clear he’s syndicate through and through, but why keep me and Evan here rather than following their orders to kill.

## Chapter 16

### *Rigs*

**M**y mind is racing with thoughts of how quickly Mattie was taken from me. I never should have left her by herself, but I couldn't risk her getting hurt by the Hounds. Unfortunately, she got hurt another way. It was a no-win situation.

Different scenarios of what might be happening Mattie bounce around in my head. Thoughts of someone breaking her arm, like they did Mel's, made me sick to my stomach. I can't believe Charlie didn't take her cell phone. That was a rookie mistake. Unfortunately, inexperienced criminals could sometimes be even more dangerous than experienced ones. Their general ineptitude made them unpredictable.

By the time Siege, Dutch, and I are speeding down a long dirt road parallel to the river, I'm fully prepared for any eventuality when it came to rescuing the woman I love. I don't care what I have to do to protect her. I'll run down the bastard who took her and break his neck with my bare hands.

I catch sight of the shed, then of some tire tracks. I just hope Charlie hasn't taken my Mattie with him. I jump off my bike and made a run for the door. Siege tries calling me back, I know he wants me to be cautious, but my brain is saying fuck that. I slam into the door with my right shoulder, and it buckles under my weight.

I stumble into the room and fall to my knees in front of Mattie, just so grateful that she's alive.

She surges forward and into my arms. "Thank God you're here. We've got to get Evan to hospital. If we don't get him there soon, I don't know if he's going to make it."

Siege stalks into the room with a bolt cutter and begins cutting through Mattie's and Evan's chains. "The van's here. They were just a minute or two behind us the whole way."



“How are we going to explain this situation?” I ask.

“I’ll handle everything myself. I plan to tell them the truth. I’ve got nothing to hide,” Mattie says.

“That’s a good idea,” Siege responds, and helps me get Evan up.

We took him to the van and settle him in the backseat. Mattie and I crawl in next to him.

Siege jumps into the back, hits the ceiling of the van twice and yelled, “Move out, and don’t stop for yellow lights.”

Chrome starts the engine and takes off.

Mattie smooths Evan’s dirty hair back out of his face. “When he’s all better, I’m going to look into fostering him.”

I stare at her like I was seeing her for the first time. “You want to be a foster mother to a fourteen-year-old?”

“I have a background in social work and a minor in psychology. Who better to see to the needs of a boy who has been traumatized? I’m in a position to take good care of him and make sure he gets the therapy he needs to make a full recovery.”

I look from her to Evan and back again, and something in my brain clicks into place. “I think that’s a really good idea. Evan needs a strong, compassionate mother figure in his life. You more than fit the bill. Whatever help you need, you can count on me.”

She looks at me and I see a world of gratitude in her eyes. “You’re a good man, Rigs. You’d be a great role model. Maybe being around you and the other brothers would make him feel like he had a family.”

I feel something powerful building in my chest. It takes me a minute to realize that something was pride. I was so grateful that Mattie respects me and my club enough to trust us to do right by this young man who had already had a rough life.

I would not only make a good role model, but a good father to this boy, I think to myself. Of course, I didn’t say that to Mattie because now was not the right moment to be talking

about making a family, but I feel it so strongly that it's impossible to ignore the rightness of it.

Mattie and I talk quietly on the way to the hospital. She tells me everything that happened from the time she got into Charlie's car until I rescued her. I don't blame my Mattie for being abducted, because I might have made the same decisions had I been in her place. I would never judge a good woman for making the best decision she could with the information she had at the time. And as I gaze down at Evan's pale face, I know that if she had not taken this chance, this boy surely would have died.

By the time we pull up to the emergency room door, I've made a decision. I was going to do everything humanly possible to make Mattie my wife and Evan my son. Of all the battles I've ever fought in my life, this was by far the most worthy one of all.

Inside the ER, nurses quickly took Evan away to be checked out and taken care of. Mattie follows Evan, and I do what I can to get him checked in at the front desk. I start by giving his name and alerting them that he's on the missing person's registry and the woman with him is a Child Protective Services supervisor. Then I give them the limited amount of information that I can remember from his file.

I sit in the waiting area, pull out my phone, and text Smoke.

***Me: Mattie found that kid we've been moving heaven and earth to find, Evan.***

***Smoke: I heard about that from Siege. What do you need me to do?***

***Me: My Mattie wants to foster him, maybe even adopt him.***

***Smoke: I know the judge working night court. I can petition them to make her his legal guardian on an emergency basis.***

***Me: Please.***

***Smoke: Text me all the information and I'll jump on it right now.***

***Me: Thanks, man. I gotta go. The cops are here.***

I watch them walk up to the front desk and then get directed to me. Sliding my phone into my pocket, I stand as they approached.

One of the officers reaches out to shake my extended hand. “My name is Office Boyce. This is Officer Shriver.”

“My name is Richard Kowalski. It’s nice to meet you both. I assume you’re here to talk to me about Evan White. I’m an ordained minister and have been working with one of the supervisors at Child Protective Services, Matilda Mathews, to find him. Evan’s been on the missing person’s registry for several months.”

We sit down in the nearly empty waiting area. “Do you mind if I ask how you became involved in this situation?” Officer Boyce asked.

“I heard there was a missing child in our community and naturally wanted to help find him. I contacted the CPS supervisor in charge of his case and asked if there was anything I could do help.”

“That makes sense. Ministers are do-gooders after all,” Officer Shriver says, and I notice him staring at my vest.

I smile at him. “We try to be.”

“Care to explain the Savage Legion cut you’re wearing?” Officer Boyce asks casually.

“There is nothing much to explain. The founder was my mentor when I was a teen and encouraged me to go into the Marine Chaplain program. It turned out to be a good fit for me. I came back and became the spiritual advisor for his club, God rest his soul.”

Both officers relax a little.

“How did you find Evan?” Office Shriver asks, getting back to business.

“I didn’t. I believe Mattie got an anonymous tip. Someone volunteered to take her to a shed out by the river that had some of his possessions. Naturally, she was excited about finding a

lead. Once she got there, she found Evan was chained up and sick. The person chained her up as well.”

I know Mattie wanted to come clean, but my gut tells me to hold off for a bit. We don’t know why Boyles decided to keep them alive rather than kill them on the syndicate’s orders. Until I track down that bastard, I want him to think they’re still in the shack.

“Where were you?”

“Our club owns a bar in town. I was there. Mattie texted me to come right away and I did.”

“Do you have any idea who the abductor might have been?”

“I’m afraid not, he was gone by the time we got there. Mattie might be able to tell you more.”

Officer Boyce writes that down in a small notebook. “Is Ms. Mathews with Evan now?”

“Yes, the doctors took him, I doubt a team of wild horses could drag her away.”

“Is there anything else you think we should know?”

“Not that I can think of. If I think of anything, I’ll let you know.”

“Thank you for your time,” Shriver says, and hands me one of his business cards.

I watch them wander back toward the doors leading to the emergency room and sent Mattie a quick text to alert her that the cops were on their way and that maybe it’s best to keep Charlie Boyles out of the story until we know exactly why he kept them alive.

Then I send a message to one of the prospects to get Evan some clothes and other basic necessities. I call the clubhouse and ask another one of the prospects to pack Mattie an overnight bag and to pick up some food for us on the way.

Next, I begin looking at wedding bands and houses. My Mattie wanted to take care of Evan, and in order for that to

happen, we need a proper home. Something with a fireplace and a white picket fence, I thought. A house fit to impress any social worker.

I feel myself transforming from the jaded spiritual advisor who did the club's dirty work so my club brothers didn't have to, to a man worthy of having love in his life and a family to care for.

## Chapter 17

### Mattie

I hover over Evan like a mother hen. I don't know why I'm so attached to him already. Maybe it's because he was the first kid I managed to find. Or it could be because I was so furious at the abuse he'd suffered. No kid deserved the bullshit this kid had to put up with from the people who were supposed to be protecting him. He saved me from being bludgeoned. It could be that some small part of me wanted to save him back.

We've been here close to five hours, and he's been sleeping most of it. The doctors said he was malnourished and severely dehydrated. They started him on an IV drip and said they wanted to keep him at least overnight for observation.

I worry that after his last case worker turned out to be the person who abducted him, he won't trust me. God knows I wouldn't in his position. Still, I want to take care of him. I don't know how I'm going to do that, though, since my apartment is too small to pass the criteria for a home study. I need at least two bedrooms in order to be considered.

There seems to be a million miles between what I want and what I can make happen before Evan is discharged. I hate the thought of him going to a group home or some other foster family who might not be as careful with him as I plan to be. I'm the only one who can protect him, because I have Rigs and the Savage Legion supporting me.

I grab my phone and send a text to Rigs.

*Me: Hey, baby, how are you holding up?*

*Rigs: I'm always fine. You never have to worry about me, sugar.*

*Me: Are you still at the hospital?*

*Rigs: Of fucking course I am. I'd never leave you during an emergency.*

*Me: Evan's sleeping and I wondered if you'd be interested in coming back to sit with me.*

*Rigs: Absolutely. I was hoping you would invite me to be with the two of you. I'm on my way now.*

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It seems like only a moment since I sent the text, that the curtain is pulled back and I see Rigs. I motion for him to be quiet so we don't wake Evan, and he comes over and gives me a kiss on the top of the head, we move to the far side of the small bay so we can whisper without disturbing him.

"He looks like he's resting peacefully," Rigs states quietly.

"They gave him something to help him rest."

"Did you get a chance to talk to him yet?" He asks.

"Not really. He was awake long enough to ask me to stay with him. I told him I wasn't going anywhere."

"I started the ball rolling on you getting emergency guardianship."

My eyes widen in shock.

"I hope I didn't overstep. I was just worried about what might happen to him. Smoke, our club attorney is pretty familiar with the judge on duty tonight. He's going to talk to him about giving you emergency custody. If that happens it'll buy you a few days before your agency starts poking around."

I fling my arms around his neck, so thankful for what he's done. Tears flow from my eyes, but I try and keep my sobbing quiet as I don't want to wake Evan. When I get myself together, I pull back, and wipe my tears away with the back of my hands. "Thank you so much for that you don't know how much it means to me."

"Anything for you. You have an overnight bag on the way as well as some new clothing for Evan and a bite to eat, because I don't know what the catering is like here."

"Wow, you've thought of everything, haven't you?" I say, still in disbelief at what he's done.

Rigs smiles at me. "Housing is going to be a problem, so I've been looking at homes."

"I was just starting to realize all things I needed to get into place in order to be considered for a possible foster arrangement."

"I thought you said you wanted to adopt him?" Rigs asks.

"Well of course I do, but only if that's what Evan wants too. Because a social worker was behind his trauma, once gets better he might not want me around."

"I think Evan might surprise you. He's half grown and should be able to understand that not all social workers are the same."

"I just hope he's willing to give me a chance and that I can manage to workout housing reasonably quick." I smile over at him, to see if we're disturbing him, but he's still out for the count.

"You don't need to worry about that part, sugar. We can pick a nice rental while we look for the house you really want."

I can't quite believe how fast this is moving, it all seems unbelievable that I might be Evan's guardian or even mother some day. "I don't know if you're quite aware of how much social workers earn. I've got some savings set aside but nowhere near enough to buy a home, I'm sure I'll figure something out though."

"Mattie, have you given any more thought to you and me?"

I grin at my protector and personal savior. "Oh, I've decided I'm keeping you for sure. Life's too short to let the best relationship in my whole life slip away."

I'm definitely in this for the long haul. You are the only woman I've ever felt this way about. And I'm not giving you up for anything."

"It feels like I might be getting the man of my dreams and a wonderful kid all on the same day."



“I’m certainly not rushing you. We’ll get a house sorted for you and Evan, and I’ll continue staying at the clubhouse for now. Whenever you’re ready for us to start living together we’ll talk to Evan. I feel like we all have to be in agreement about this, or it’s not going to work. That kid’s been through too much already, he needs to know he can trust us to have his back.”

“Hearing you say that just makes my heart melt for you. You are by far the kindest most decent man that I have ever met. Anyone would be lucky to end up with a man like you. I’m so glad you called me and offered to help me with my caseload.”

Rigs kisses the top of my head. “No matter what obstacles get thrown in our path, we’re not giving up on those other kids. I don’t care if it takes the rest of our lives, we’re gonna find out what happened to them and help them if we can.”

I’m blinking back the tears at his words. “Yeah, I feel the same way. No matter what we’ve got to find every single one of them.”

He takes my hands in his and looks deeply into my eyes. “You and I are a good team, sugar.”

We spent some time talking about what we want our life to look like moving forward. I ask about what happened earlier with Mel, Rigs tells me that it’s all a bit of a clusterfuck, but he thinks they have a solution. Suddenly his phone vibrates.

“Nothing urgent,” he says. “I just got a text from the prospects saying they’ve brought some stuff for you and Evan. I need to go to the lobby, but I’ll be right back.”

“Hurry back,” I say.

Rigs gives me a quick peck on the lips and head out the door.

# Chapter 18

## Rigs

Chrome pulls the van door open as I approach. “Thanks for helping me out today,” I tell him.

“No problem. We got everything on your list. I hope the clothes are the right size.”

I look over the items and slide them back into the duffel bag they came in. “Everything looks good to me. Thanks for taking off the price tags and thinking to buy a duffel.”

“We put snacks in the side pocket. Maybe clue him in about that, cos hospital food sucks.”

“That was real nice of you. He’s pretty out of it right now, but I’m sure he’ll appreciate it when he wakes up.”

Chipper hands me a small overnight bag I recognize from the multitude of suitcases Mattie brought to the clubhouse. Blushing furiously, he stammers, “I packed her two outfits and an extra pair of shoes. She had a bunch of makeup on the bathroom counter, so I grabbed that and her brush. Hope that’s enough to get her through the next day or two.”

“I’m sure it will be fine, and thank you. I know going through a woman’s personal effects can feel weird.”

He nods, looking ten kinds of relieved.

“I almost forgot,” Chrome says, handing me a bag that smells really good. “There’s enough food in here for the three of you.”

“This is all great. You two are killin’ the whole prospect thing. I look forward to having you both as club brothers very soon.”

They both smile at the compliment.

As I return to the emergency room, I stopped by the nurse’s desk to ask if Evan was allowed to eat.

One of the nurses checks his chart. “It looks like he’s been cleared for oral intake. The doctor has just written that he needs to force fluids, take small bites, and chew thoroughly.”

“I understand completely. When he wakes up, if he’s able to eat, I’ll be sure to keep an eye on him.”

The nurse smiles at me. “I’m sure you will. Just press the call button if Evan needs anything or you have any questions.”

“I’ll do exactly that. Thank you.”

“Have a nice evening.”

I go back to Evan’s room and tuck both travel bags beside my chair, but keep a hold of the food. “Are you getting hungry at all, sugar?” I ask Mattie.

“I feel like I’ve been a nervous wreck for hours, and now that it’s all over I can eat a horse.”

I had to work to keep from laughing. “I’ve got sandwiches.”

“A sandwich would hit the spot.”

I hand Mattie a sandwich wrapped in white paper and watched as she opened it.

Her hands are so small and delicate. I’ve always felt a little ham-handed around this woman. Mattie was the opposite of me in almost every regard. But they say opposites attract, and I could see for the first time how that was true. We were like two halves of the same whole.

Just then, Evan bolts awake in a panic. “No, don’t hit me. I’ll be good.”

He sounds like a child even though he’s fourteen. Who put such fear in his heart? Who harmed him? My hands tighten around the top of the bag I was still holding.

Mattie puts her sandwich down and rushes to his side. She grasps him by the shoulders, “Evan, everything is okay. You’re safe now. Remember, I rescued you from the cabin?”

“You what?” he asks as he blinked up at her as though he had never seen her before. “Who are you?”

“Remember, we were at the cabin together. I told you we were about to be rescued and we were. Do you remember now?”

Looking over her shoulder, he sees me and his face lights up. “I remember him. He broke the door down so we could leave.”

I hurry over to his bedside. “My name is Rigs. I helped Mattie rescue you.”

“I like your vest. Are you a cowboy?”

“No. I’m a member of the Savage Legion. It’s a motorcycle club. How are you feeling right now?”

Evan frowns for an instant before smiling again. “I feel great. Really great. Like so great this all can’t possibly be real.” He starts to tear up.

I guess the combination of fear, illness, and whatever meds the docs have pumped him full of, have gotten the poor kid confused.

“Do you have any questions you’d like to ask us?” Mattie says gently.

He looks around before asking quietly, “Did I die? Is this where people with really shitty lives end up, trapped in a hospital for all eternity?”

Mattie turns to me, and the expression on her face is so lost that I take over the conversation. I hold out my hand and he slowly grasped in his. I give his hand a little squeeze before letting go. “See? I’m a real person. Mattie is too. We brought you to the hospital because you were dehydrated, and they gave you medicine to help you feel better. That’s why everything feels a bit strange.”

“Thank God. I thought I was losing my mind. This doesn’t feel like real life. Nothing feels like it should.”

“Just hang in there. The medication will wear off soon enough.”

“I wish I didn’t feel this way,” he says sadly.

“Would you like something to drink?”

He nods. “That sounds good. My mouth feels like cotton.”

Handing him a glass of water, I remind him, “It’s probably a side effect of your medication. Are you hungry?”

“I could eat. Wait, I am I allowed to eat in a hospital?”

“Yeah, you can eat, kiddo. Want a turkey sandwich?”

“I want candy. I’m a candy-tarian,” he says with a sly grin.

I can’t help but laugh at that. I’m glad that his sense of humor is intact after all he’s been through. “I think I might have something for you.”

I grab the duffle from across the room and put it on the bed next to him. “Mattie and I bought you some supplies to get you back on your feet. Just some clothing and stuff. I believe there might even be snacks in the side pockets.”

He dug into a pocket and pulls out a chocolate bar.

I remember what the nurse said and caution him, “You haven’t eaten a lot lately. The doctor wants you to take small bites and chew slowly for the first day. Do you think you can do that for us?”

He nods and nibbles a small bite off the corner of his bar. “Oh my God this is amazing. It’s been months since I’ve had anything nice to eat.” Glancing down at the duffel, he asks suspiciously, “Are you sure all this is for me? I don’t have to be share it with other foster kids or anything?”

“Nope. You’re the only foster kid in our world right now,” Mattie answers.

He eyes her with suspicion. “So you’re my new foster person?”

“I’d like to be if you would be willing to give me a chance.”

“Are you two a package deal?”

“Maybe.” I say, looking at Mattie. She’s smiling at me encouragingly. “Would that sweeten the deal or be a deal

breaker for you?"

Taking another nibble from his chocolate bar, he says,  
"Haven't decided yet."

## Chapter 19

### *Mattie*

I'd spent the last forty-eight hours fussing over Evan. He was such a mild-mannered teen that I just know in my heart that Strawn was lying about him being an aggressive troublemaker.

Instead of being tucked under the blanket, he's enjoying some freedom by sitting on the edge of the bed wearing the new clothes Rigs bought for him. Evan looks up at me, "If it's possible, I want to stay with you and Rigs. You both seem real nice."

I smile, relieved that he'd decided I'm worth taking a chance on. That poor kid has no reason to trust adults after what happened to him, so to know that he feels safe with me and Rigs, warms my heart. "I'm so glad. Thank you for trusting us. You can tell the judge that's what you would like to do. Be honest with him. And try to trust the system. I know that is asking a lot considering how badly the system let you down, but just because it broke down once doesn't mean it will again."

"Will there be any police at the courthouse?" he asks cautiously.

Something about the tone of his voice sends up warning flags. "Are you afraid of law enforcement officers, Evan?"

"I don't know. Maybe," he responds before bringing his hand up to chew on his thumbnail.

"Want to tell me what happened to make you fearful of law enforcement?"

He shakes his head and continues chewing away on his thumbnail.

"I want you to know something, Evan. It doesn't matter if you've done something wrong and had a run-in with the law. We all make mistakes, and part of your job as a teenager is

learning right from wrong and practicing making good decisions. I won't be surprised or even mad at you if you've been arrested or had some kind of warning about bad behavior from law enforcement."

His eyes get big and he shakes his head again. "It's nothing like that. I promise. Police officers scare me. They all carry guns, and guns can kill people. They hurt you if you don't do what they want."

"That's a valid fear. I want you to know that law enforcement officers are very trustworthy. They don't discharge their weapons without good cause, and they would have no reason to be pointing a gun at you while we're in the courthouse. They only hurt bad people, and then only if the bad people can't be stopped any other way."

"Is Rigs going to be there?"

"Yes. Do you feel safer when he's around?"

"He's not going to let anybody push you around and I don't think you're gonna let anybody push me around. As long as the three of us stick together, we're gonna be okay," he says in a timid voice that leads me to believe he's trying to convince himself, more so than me. Before I can say anything, he adds, "We just need to get in talk, to the judge, and get out of there as soon as possible, right?"

"Alright. We can definitely do that, Evan."

When he turns and starts pawing through his duffel bag again, I texted Rigs.

*Me: I wanted to talk to you about something before you leave.*

*Rigs: What's going on?*

*Me: I just discovered that Evan's afraid of the police.*

*Rigs: I didn't read anything in his file about him ever committing a crime or getting arrested.*

*Me: Me either. The only police involvement in his case happened after he went missing.*



*Rigs: Did you talk to him?*

*Me: Yeah, he wanted to make sure you were coming because he believes you'll protect us.*

*Rigs: He's damned right about that. But I think if Evan is afraid, he must have good cause.*

*Me: I hope once he's used to us, he'll open up and tell us more about his worries. Hurry, Rigs. I have a strange gut feeling about going to that courthouse today.*

*Rigs: I'm on it. Give me fifteen minutes and I'll be at your side.*

“Am I ever going to see my grandmother again?” Evan asks, and I put my phone down to look up into his worried face.

“We can take you to see her once everything's settled. I read in your file that your grandmother has heart problems and got to the point that she was unable to live independently even with all the help you gave her.”

Evan blinks back tears. “Yeah, I thought we were doing okay. But we were always running short of money. A guy at a local garage let me help out for some extra cash, but it wasn't enough. One day our electricity got turned off. Our neighbor called CPS. Once they found out my grandmother couldn't live on her own, it was game over for us.” Looking away, he adds, “It was my fault for not earning more money.”

I get up and close the distance between us, turning his face up to look at me. “Don't you ever think any of this is your fault. You did the best you could to take care of your grandmother. She survived because you were there to look out for her. It's not her fault that she got old and too sick for you to care for. Neither of you are to blame.”

“I guess that's just life, isn't it?”

My heart was breaking for this kid. “There's no rule that says you can't call and talk with your grandmother anytime you want. Like I said, I can even take you to visit her. I'm sure she would be happy to see you.”

Suddenly, Evan flings his arms around my waist and gives me a huge bear hug. It only lasts for a second, but it's enough to let me know that he now saw a light that at the end of this long, dark tunnel he'd been trapped in. Our agency hadn't gotten word that his grandmother has passed away, so I had to believe she was still in that nursing home waiting to hear from her grandson.

Evan's doctor had told us earlier that since his labs were looking good, he could go ahead and be released so we were waiting on the nurse to come in with the paperwork. Evan and I were so happy to hear that news and now it felt like I could finally start planning our new life. Finally, the nurse breezed in with his discharge paperwork and we were ready to go.

My phone went off with a text message from Rigs, letting us know that he was downstairs waiting for us. I help the nurse get Evan into a wheelchair and we head downstairs. He's recovering well from his ordeal, but after months of being shackled his legs are still pretty weak, so he's going to need some physical therapy. What we saw outside floors me, Rigs is standing in front of one of the Savage Legion's vans. And behind him are six members of the Savage Legion with their bikes, waiting to escort us to courthouse to the courthouse in style. I didn't even have to ask why they were here, I knew it was because Rigs wanted to ensure that Evan felt safe today.

And it works. I can tell because Evan's eyes light up at the sight of them. A huge smile spreads across his face as he climbs unsteadily out of the wheelchair and into the van. I was standing right behind him in case he needed help, but he didn't. There was a spring in his step that I would not have thought possible considering the condition he was in when we brought him to the hospital two days ago.

I watch Evan buckle his seatbelt and then climb into the front seat. There was a huge lump in my throat that wouldn't seem to go away no matter how many times I swallowed. When Rigs catches sight of the emotional look on my face, he hooks his hand around the back of my neck and tugs me forward for a short, sweet kiss on the lips. Evan was right—as

long as Rigs was with us, everything would be okay. I feel that all the way down to my bones.

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Driving down the highway, two brothers ride side by side in front of us, two rode side by side behind us, and two rode alongside the van. It felt like a presidential escort. Evan is just eating this up. I have a feeling that as soon as he's old enough to get his driver's license he's going to want a motorcycle. He asks the names of the other brothers and whether Rigs was friends with each of them. When we get to the courthouse and leave the van, Rigs' club brothers flank us in pretty much the same formation as they did with their bikes. Inside, the very first thing I notice is that there were a lot more Las Salinas police officers walking around than I'd ever seen in the courthouse before. Something about seeing so many of them sets off my Spidey Senses.

Evan moves closer to me and mumbles, "Told you so. We need to get in and back out quickly. Don't look them in the eyes."

I slip Evan's hand into mine and give it a squeeze. I want to tell him everything would be fine, but something seems off, and I don't want to lie to him. It was the way the officers' eyes flash to us and away again, like they were monitoring us. I'd never felt like this before, vulnerable, open, and almost like I'd done something wrong. I hadn't though. Neither had Evan. He was a minor and the victim of a vicious crime. I wondered if it was maybe the Savage Legion that was making them edgy. I've only ever been at the courthouse in my role as a CPS supervisor, and never flanked by members of an MC.

I ask Rigs, "What officers responded to the cabin? You called them, right?"

"We didn't call anyone. Remember those officers that came to talk to you in the ER? They just turned up out of the blue. I'd assumed it was triggered by Evan's name being entered into the system."

I nod, "Yeah, if a kid is listed as missing there's usually some alert system."

“You didn’t tell them about Charlie, did you?”

“No. I said what you told me to, that it was an anonymous tip.”

“Good,” Rigs says, “We’re still trying to find him. The guy has a target on his head, but I want my club brothers to get to him before the syndicate. What about Evan, did he tell them who took him?”

“He was asleep when they first came. Then when they returned, he was still confused and said he couldn’t remember anything at all. He started to get really agitated and in the end the doctor told them to leave.” I pause, “Though, thinking about how he acted earlier, I’m wondering if his fear of the police has something to do with his reluctance to talk?”

“Maybe,” Rigs says as he rushes us into the court room and over to a table where Smoke is sitting.

I make sure Evan is settled, and then take a seat myself.

“What the hell is going on today?” Rigs asks the attorney in a low voice.

“You saw them?”

“They were hard to miss, brother.”

“It doesn’t matter. I have this one in the bag.”

“Are you sure?” I ask anxiously.

Smoke turns to look at Evan and me. “I’ve already got his provisional agreement. Unless something really weird happens, you will all be walking out just like you walked in.”

Evan mumbles, “We have to stay together no matter what. Otherwise, the police might get me—”

His words are cut off when Smoke shoots him a frown. “When this hearing is over and we get back to the clubhouse, I’m gonna pick that brain of yours, is there something you’re not telling us, kid?”

Evan’s mouth snaps shut so hard that I hear his teeth click, leaving a strange feeling of foreboding churning in my stomach.

I just keep telling myself over and over again that I'm being foolish. Nothing bad can happen in a courthouse. The syndicate wouldn't dare do anything here, and the cops were our friends, not enemies. But a little voice in the back of my mind wasn't buying it.

The judge enters and calls the hearing to order. Smoke stands up and begins presenting his petition for me to be granted emergency custody of Evan. It all sounds very logical and reasonable. Evan needs an immediate foster care placement, and I'm volunteering my services. I had never technically been his case worker or even his case worker's supervisor, so there was no conflict of interest. The judge Smoke had spoken to originally, had stated that he had no objections, but because there was no immediate risk to the child while he was hospitalized, and the fact that Evan had living relatives, the hearing would take place on the next business day. I'd been on tenterhooks since then, convinced something would go wrong.

Halfway through Smoke's presentation, three law enforcement officers walk in, one of whom looked to be high up on the food chain. Evan edges closer to me.

"What the fuck is the Chief of Police for Salinas County doing here?" Rigs hisses.

The judge looked up, looking peeved. "Is there any reason in particular you're interrupting my court today, Chief Popelstone?"

"Yes, sir. I'm here to take Evan White into custody."

"I assume you have a warrant for his arrest. I don't remember signing one." The level of disdain in the judge's tone is noticeable.

"No warrant needed, there is probable cause that Evan White has committed a felony."

The judge waved the man forward. "And what is your probable cause?"

Chief Popelstone hands a file to the judge. "Let's see what you have there. Several houses on the west side of Las Salinas

have been broken into over the last month, Mr. White. Do you know anything about those crimes?”

Evan clings to me and shouts, “No, please your honor. I spent the last few months chained to a bed. It would have been impossible for me to go anywhere, much less steal anything. Don’t let him take me, please.” Evan is trembling. Whether it was with fear or anger, I can’t tell.

I stand and say, “There’s a police report and hospital records that support Evan’s claim. I’m the one who discovered him chained and dehydrated. He’s got severe muscle wasting from weeks of immobility. It doesn’t make sense to think he could have been involved in criminal activity during that time.”

The Chief opens his mouth, but Smoke beat him to it. “I have already presented evidence of Evan White’s recent abduction, thus necessitating the need for a familiar caregiver with a therapeutic background. Clearly after the ordeal this young man has been through, the last thing he needs is to be threatened with arrest for a crime he couldn’t possibly have committed.”

The Chief of Police replies stubbornly, “I still have the right to question him about these break ins. He might have valuable information that could lead to the arrest of the perpetrators.”

The judge hands him back his file. “No, you have no right to approach this vulnerable minor without actual proof indicating he was involved. From what I can see, you have none. There is no justification for an arrest without a warrant, and I am certainly not granting a warrant based on the evidence you have presented today.”

“If I could just have a word with him in private.”

Rigs gets to his feet. “Why in the world would you to talk to him in private? Surely whatever you have to ask him could be done in open court?”

“Law enforcement doesn’t conduct interrogations out in the open, in view of the public.”

“In this case, you won’t be interrogating him at all. I’m issuing an order precluding you from further traumatizing this child without actual proof he was involved in a crime,” the judge announces. “Chief Popelstone, please feel free to leave my court room.”

Once he leaves, Smoke gets back to presenting his case. When he was done, the judge grants me temporary custody for ninety days, which was way more than I was expecting.

The minute the judge walks out of the room, Evan turns to me. “Does this mean I’m not getting arrested?”

“Of course, you’re not getting arrested. You didn’t do anything wrong.”

He looks nervously at the ground. I think once we get back then we will have to have a talk with him. There is something troubling him deeply.

“Congratulations on getting temporary custody. I guess our next case will be in ninety days with the family law master. Mattie, you know better than anyone alive what it’s going to take to get permanent custody, so I won’t lecture you on the ins and outs of that,” Smoke tells me.

“I know exactly what I need to do, and I plan to take care of it all as soon as possible. Thank you for your help today. We couldn’t have done this without you.”

Rigs adds his own thanks, and even Evan murmurs a polite thank you before we part company with Smoke. The brothers close ranks around us again as we walk out of the courtroom. There were practically no law enforcement officers inside the building anymore. It didn’t take long for us to figure out why.

When we step outside there are a couple of flatbed tow trucks loading up the brothers’ bikes. Rigs starts to walk over to talk to them, but Evan grab his arm and shakes his head no. Chief Popelstone was standing beside the police officers talking to someone on a cell phone.

Another of the bikers approaches him instead, and they were still arguing when we get to the van. Rigs pulls out his phone and sent a short text.

Meanwhile, Evan is staring nervously out the back window. “We should leave now. If we don’t leave right now, they’re not going to let us leave.”

“That’s not true,” I assure him.

“It is true. The kid knows what he’s talking about,” Rigs says. “They’re separating us from our security escort by impounding their bikes.”

“I don’t understand why they would do that.”

Rigs hits the button to lock the doors, looks out the window and then back at Evan. “I do. I don’t know if I ever told you this or not, but you know the big boss we’ve been looking for? His code name is Pope. I think we found our man.”

It feels like someone’s jabbed a knife in my chest. The police chief’s name was Popelstone. That couldn’t be a coincidence. Suddenly, all the pieces of the puzzle fall neatly into place. “So this is the last man standing. What I want to know is how Evan got wrangled up in all this.”

We turn back to look at Evan, just as he bolts out of his seat, I was about to stop him thinking he was making a run for it, then I realize he’s seen Rigs’ club brothers approaching. The kid unlocks the back door and pushes it open. Six club brothers climbed into the van, one after another.

“That fucking police chief claims we were all parked in one hour parking,” Vapor grumbles.

“It’s a trap,” Rigs says.

Vapor and Haze are still muttering about the bikes.

Rigs leans backward. “Fuck the bikes. We’ve found Pope.”

Vapor looks stunned for a second, then exclaims, “Damn it! This asshole clearly just wants to get his hands on the kid. What’s the plan, Rigs?”

Suddenly, there’s the deafening roar of motorcycles. Over a dozen bikes flood into the parking lot and take up positions around the van.

Rigs shoots me a rueful grin. “I called in enforcements.”



Looking at his club brothers and then at Evan, Rigs says, “Here’s the plan. We get Evan and Mattie back to the clubhouse where they’re safe. Once the clubhouse is on lockdown, we do a little luring of our own. Now that we know who our target is, Zen can do some electronic snooping. We’ll take whatever it is he values and make him come looking for it.”

“Nope,” I say, finding an instant flaw with that idea. “Not a good plan. I don’t want to lure a bunch of trigger-happy cops anywhere near Evan.”

Rigs grins. “Calm down, mama bear. We’re not luring them to the clubhouse. We’ll lure them somewhere isolated like that cabin they held the two of you at.”

“Yeah, because bringing a bunch of cops to the clubhouse to shoot the place up would piss Siege off like nobody’s business,” Haze said.

Rigs laughs. “That too.” He turns the ignition and signals for everyone to move out. “Let’s get the fuck outta here.”

## Chapter 20

### *Rigs*

The minute Chief Popelstone showed up in court, I shot Siege a quick text, telling him to send out the cavalry and put us on lockdown. At first, I didn't realize who he was, but when the Chief of Police for the entire fucking county of Las Salinas shows up at a custody hearing, especially with trumped up charges against a kid, I knew there was something big going down.

It wasn't until we'd left, and I saw the tow trucks that it all clicked into place. When we pull into the clubhouse, the other old ladies and kids are already there. The prospects are busy locking the place down.

Mattie comes up to me when we were all out of the van. "Tell me you're not going to use yourself for bait."

I shake my head. "Pope doesn't give two shits about me. He wouldn't cross the road to spit on me if I were on fire. We'll have to figure out what he does care about and use that for bait."

"Not his family, right?"

I snort a laugh. "Men like Pope don't give a shit about their families. They're too selfish to care about anything but themselves. Their focus is on money, power, and luxury. Those are the things we will turn into bait."

She pats me on the chest. "Just promise me that you'll be safe out there. I'm getting to be quite fond of you. It would be a shame if some asshole took you away from me."

"And Evan," I remind her. "You might need a good man in your life, but that boy needs a good male role model after all the shit he's been through. I never thought I'd have one good thing in my life to come home to, much less two."

Her face lights up. "I like the sound of that. Once this is over, you and I are going to get hitched and live happily ever

after.”

“Am I going crazy, or did you just propose to me?”

Mattie goes a lovely shade of pink and laughs, “I never thought I would end up falling in love or getting married. But since meeting you, that’s all I want to do. So yeah, I guess you could say I proposed to you. You don’t have to tell me yes or no right away.”

“Of fucking course I want to marry you. You’re all I’ve wanted since the very first time I laid eyes on you back at Siege and Cleo’s wedding. You were the prettiest damn thing I’d ever seen. Little did I know that in addition to being beautiful, you were smart, resourceful, and dedicated to a cause greater than yourself. No man in his right mind could resist a woman like you.”

Before she can respond, Evan walks up to us. “Some big dude with a loud voice has been yelling your name, Rigs. I don’t know how you couldn’t hear that.”

“Do me a favor, kid. Tell him I’m on my way.”

The minute Evan wanders off, I pull my Mattie into a tight embrace and kiss her for all I’m worth. When we finally pull apart, I can tell she was aroused. Trauma will do that to a person, especially once that burst of adrenaline decides it needs to go somewhere.

My cock is fit to burst in my pants. Memories of the last time we were naked together flit through my mind. How smooth and soft her skin was, how sweet she smelled, the taste of her arousal on my tongue.

Mattie is thinking the same thing. I can tell because she glances down at my raging hard-on and then her tongue comes out to wet her pretty pink lips. I cup her face in my hands and give her one last tender kiss before whispering, “Later, I promise, sugar.”

I force myself to turn away and stalk into the clubhouse before I lost what tiny shred of self-control I had left. I walk into our meeting room, where Siege is talking to Zen. “What did you find on Pope? Anything useful?”

“Of fucking course,” Zen say proudly.

“Well, we’re gonna need to do something, cos I got pulled over twice getting from the courthouse to the clubhouse,” Smoke said as he walked in. “Popelstone impounded my Beamer right out of the parking lot at the courthouse. I had to borrow a car to get here. Got ticketed by two different cops between the courthouse and the clubhouse. Good thing traffic tickets follow the person, and not the car, or my friend would be pissed.”

“It seems as though he’s put the word out that all members of the Savage Legion MC are to be harassed good and hard. He’s not gonna stop at that though, he might have been hiding in plain sight, but now he knows we’re onto him shit’s gonna hit the fan real soon.” Siege said. “I want eyes on all our businesses, make sure we’ve got twenty-four hour recording. I wouldn’t put it past him to try and set us up. We know our businesses are clean, but we need to make sure it stays that way and no syndicate fuckers plant anything on our properties, you on it Zen?”

“On it,” our IT guru says as he heads back to his office.

“What do you know about this guy, Smoke,” Siege asks.

“That he’s a gigantic prick who misuses his power as Las Salinas County Chief of Police, but it’s mostly zoning and construction he focuses on. It’s an open secret that he takes backhanders from developers, but no one has made anything stick. He comes from old money and is untouchable.”

“What about links to the syndicate?” I ask.

“Nothing that Zen could find, that’s why he wasn’t on our radar. If we went after all the corrupt officials, then we’d still be on the starting blocks.” Siege paces across the floor looking like he’s about to implode. I guess we’re all reeling from finding out who Pope is. For fuck’s sake the clue’s in his fucking name.

“Well, Popelstone checks all the boxes for the leader of a criminal enterprise. Does he have family we need to work around?”

“Nope. Word on the street is his wife left him and moved to the East Coast years ago. Thank God the stupid prick never had any kids.”

“Anything we could use to bait him with? Because I’m eager to do to him what he tried to do to us back at the courthouse,” I say.

Zen pops his head around the office door, “Forgot to say, I found something on Pope, he’s got a nice spread out on route seventy, with horses, a walnut orchard, and a collection of antique cars. The taxes on that property suggest it’s worth a fuck ton. It thinking this is clearly his weak spot,”

“Real estate, antique cars, and horses are costly hobbies for a police chief. I wonder how he explains it all to people curious enough to ask about it all?” Tank says.

“Family money. What I want to know is how we should go about luring him out to his multi-million-dollar property,” Siege says.

“I say we create a distraction in town and take a team out to his house. I want to have a look around and see if I can dig up even more incriminating evidence on him.” I was all too eager to begin taking his life apart one piece at a time.

Siege nudges my shoulder and jerks his chin toward the doorway. I turn to see Evan standing there. His arms are folded high across his chest, and he’s pulling on his bottom lip with one hand. He looks anxious as hell, but like he had something he wanted to say.

I go over to him. “You okay kiddo? Is Mattie alright?”

“Yeah. I want to tell you what I saw that made that man want me dead.”

“Do you need to talk in private or can you tell the brothers?”

“I’ll tell anyone that will listen. I owe Ben that much.”

I lead him into our meeting room and sit him down next to me in one of the chairs. I turn to Siege. “Better call everyone in here.”

When the rest of my brothers are seated in the meeting room, I put a gentle hand on Evan's shoulder. "Talk whenever you're ready."

Evan takes a deep breath and say, "The police chief has dogs and I saw what he does with them."

"What do you mean he has dogs?" I ask, confused.

"The police chief breeds dogs and then he makes them vicious."

There weren't any dog fighting rings around for hundreds of miles in any direction. I should know, we put them all out of operation years ago. Dog fighting makes me sick, but given what the syndicate do, it's small fry. I'm not sure where Evan is going with this, so I try and coax him to talk, "How do you know about that?"

"A friend of mine, Ben, worked for him, feeding his horses, and mucking out the stables, it was a weekend job. There were dog kennels as well, Ben wasn't allowed to go in there, but he heard the constant barking. He knew they were for dog fights, but the money was good. He said every so often the chief would have these parties where lots of men would come to the house, on those weekends he was usually sent home mid-morning." Evan pauses and I can see he's starting to look distressed.

"It's okay kid, you're doing good," I say encouragingly.

"One Saturday afternoon Ben came over to see me, this was when I was living with my foster family. He was really upset, he didn't want to tell me at first, but I kept asking him to. I was scared I'd never seen him like that. He'd been working that morning and he realized he'd left his cell phone there, so he went back to get it. There were cars lining the driveway and he could hear shouts coming from the barn behind the kennels. There was barking and cheering, Ben grabbed his cell phone, and he was going to run home when he heard screaming, it sounded like a person. So, he went to take a look and- and—"

The poor kid is shaking, "You're doing good son," I say to him and pat his shoulder. "I can see this is hard for you.

You're safe here. I'm not gonna let anyone hurt you."

The kid takes a deep breath as if he's preparing himself for the worst. "It was a woman. They had a naked woman in the ring and the dogs were tearing her to bits."

"Fucking bastard!" Siege spits out.

My other club brothers make sounds of disgust. We've seen the depravity that sick fuck's organization feeds on, I didn't think the syndicate could hit lower than the trafficking, but this was way up there in sheer evilness.

"He didn't know what to do, he was terrified and vomited. But he filmed it, only a few seconds before he ran. But it was enough to show what they were doing. We didn't know what to do with the evidence though—they were cops, important businessmen. Even with evidence as soon as we talked then he'd kill us."

"Holy shit, Siege gasps. "What did you do?"

"Ben was terrified, so was I. I said we needed to go back there, see if we could find anything else. Maybe physical proof, I didn't know who we could take it to. Ben was too scared so I went early the next morning, someone had cleaned up, but I could see the bloodstains. It was even more horrible than I thought it would be, I was so frightened. I found a bloody tooth lying on the ground and thought it might have been the woman's and I went running back to Ben's."

I wondered if he had the tooth, hell, I wondered if his friend still had the video recording. Not wanting to interrupt his train of thought I wait for Evan to continue.

"His parents were both out, his dad's away a lot, and his mom works long hours. Anyway, there was suddenly a loud knocking on the door and the chief was yelling for Ben, saying he hadn't shown up to work and he needed to talk to him about something. Saying if he didn't open up then they were coming in. Ben realized that he must have been spotted somehow, and he made me hide, because he said if the Chief found me there, he'd kill me too."

"What happened to Ben?"

“They dragged him out of the house, and I followed them on my bike back to the farm. There were four of them, Chief Popelstone and three younger men. They took him out to the barn, and I climbed up into the hayloft. I wanted to make sure Ben was okay.”

Evan’s snaps his mouth closed and looks to be on the verge of tears. I want to tell him it’s okay, that he doesn’t need to tell us what happened. But I can’t, we need to know.

“Almost done, son” I say gently.

Swallowing thickly, he continues. “I remember it like it was yesterday, it’s all I see when I close my eyes. He picked up a rock and just smashed it into Ben’s head.”

“Did Pope catch you snooping around his place that day?”

“No, but I was scared they would. No one would believe me, I think they had Ben’s phone. I still had the woman’s tooth but that wasn’t proof enough without the video. I didn’t know what to do, I couldn’t tell my foster father, he was constantly having a go at me, saying I was a troublemaker and I guess I was. Ben’s mom thought he’d run away, I couldn’t tell her the truth. I was too frightened to sleep at night, and I started acting out. Then Mr. Strawn said he was going to send me to a facility for bad kids, and I was scared of going there. I knew I had to tell someone, so I called the only person I knew I could trust—my case worker at CPS and he said he would help me. He came to collect me that evening but instead of keeping me safe, Charlie chained me up, it turns out he was working for Chief Popelstone as well, but for some reason he wanted me alive. I was there for months. Then Mattie showed up and saved me.”

“Kid, I can’t even begin to comprehend what you’ve been through. But you have my word that no one is going to hurt you again, at least not while I can draw a breath.”

“I don’t wanna see you or Mattie get hurt. But I don’t see how you can stop him, I know his secrets and now he knows I’m alive, he won’t stop. Ben’s parents think he’s a runaway. They don’t know he’s buried out behind the barn.”



“He’s buried there?” I ask.

Evan nods.

I look at my club brothers. If we can get law enforcement to go to Pope’s property before he gets his men to clean up, then that’s evidence. “Another reason to pay a visit to the farm.”

Tank and Dutch both nod their agreement, while Siege continues pacing.

We need to discuss details, and I don’t think Evan should be around to hear that. “Is there anything else you want to share with us about this situation, kid?” I ask.

“I don’t know how you’re planning to get rid of him, but I don’t think putting him in jail would work. He has too many cop friends and someone would probably just let him out.”

“Don’t you worry about any of this. My club brothers and I will take care of it. You can trust us to do what’s right. He’s not going to be getting his claws into anyone else in this town.”

“Watch your back with him, Rigs. He’s tricky. I don’t wanna see you or any of your friends get hurt.” Evan warns.

I give him a feral grin. “Don’t worry kiddo. Taking care one murdering asshole is not gonna be a problem for the Savage Legion. We’ve taken out tougher men than him.”

Evan’s shoulders relax and he nods.

“Why don’t you go upstairs and sit with Mattie, so she doesn’t worry. I’ve got lots of movies there for you guys to choose from.”

“What I want to do is go with you,” he says sincerely.

“No, you don’t. You’re only fourteen years old. You need to concentrate on being a teen and leave the heavy lifting to the Savage Legion. The day will come when you get to be a badass hero, but that day is not today.”

“I want to get revenge for my friend.” Evan’s stubborn expression reminds me of myself at that age.

“I know you do. And that proves that you’re a good person. But I’m not allowing you to put yourself in danger. You just got out of the hospital. You need to take it easy and recover your strength.”

“Alright, but if you change your mind let me know,” he says, then makes his way out of the room. I don’t know if it’s the relief at finally unburdening himself of the shit he’s been weighed down by for months, but in that moment, he seems almost like a carefree teenager.

“You’ve got a mighty fine kid there, Rigs. You and Mattie are very lucky to have him,” Siege says.

“I agree. With any luck, he’s gonna grow up to be a fine brother one day,” I reply. “Now, let’s get down to the business of hunting down and eliminating our final syndicate asshole.”

## Chapter 21

### *Rigs*

**W**ithin an hour we are at Pope's ranch. It's at least a hundred acres with a modern sprawling house and several outbuildings. We all spread out, Siege and I head inside along with Tank and Dutch.

Everything looks like you'd expect in a farmhouse, until we get upstairs to the master bedroom. The stupid fucker has guns and ammo out the wazoo. There's a safe in one corner, and I experimentally turn the handle fully expecting it to be locked, the door swings open revealing one-ounce gold bars, money in small, unmarked bills and a ton gaudy gold jewelry from the eighties which I'm certain he's collecting it for the value of the gold than the esthetics. There's paperwork showing evidence of multiple bank accounts and an offshore account in the Cayman Islands. There's some more paperwork on the bed and looking in the drawer of his nightstand I find what appears to be a key to a safe deposit box. I put the key in my pocket for safe keeping. It looks like Pope got interrupted and had to leave quick sharpish, I guess seeing Evan alive and well at the courthouse, and having his plans of getting rid of him derailed means he's having to destroy as much evidence as possible before the Feds catch up to him. We gather up all the bank info and valuables as we go along. There is zero evidence of any kind of national affiliation, when we first came across the syndicate, the members were boasting of a coast-to-coast operation, but it soon became clear that was not the case. Once the Hendersons were arrested and the FBI got onto their trafficking operation, the syndicate had all but folded. Pope might have been the last man standing, but it was becoming obvious that rather than being some criminal mastermind, he was more the facilitator. This man seems to be running his own little criminal enterprise.

We head back outside with pillowcases full of valuables. I already know we're going to burn his place to the ground,

along with his precious walnut orchard. It falls into the category of hitting him where it hurts. When we meet up with our club brothers, Smoke looks sick to his stomach. “Found his dog fighting operation. The pups are pretty young. It looks like he killed the adults already, not sure why he left the pups. Sure as fuck ain’t because he’s got a heart. I’m guessing plausible deniability—there’s no adults, so no trained fighting dogs. The barn’s a bloody mess and there’s trash bags filled with bodies in the dumpster. We’re gonna load up the pups and see if we find good homes for them.

Siege gasps and curses under his breath. I turn to see what he’s looking at and my blood runs cold. Vapor is walking toward us carrying a body wrapped in a tarp. Haze is walking solemnly at his side and is quick to explain. “Ben’s body was exactly where Evan said it would be, we can’t leave him here. He deserves a proper burial, not a shallow grave behind a blood-soaked barn.”

Siege nods solemnly. “Absolutely, put him in the van. We’ll contact family, it’s not the sort of news you want to give a parent, but they’ll have closure.”

Turning to Tank, Siege says, “We’ll torch the place and hunker down until the stupid fucker shows up to see where all the smoke is coming from.”

“Then his ass is mine,” I say vehemently.”

Pope won’t be getting a proper burial, like Ben. He’s going to wind up face down at our favorite dump site. Pope is the kind of garbage that never stops hurting other people until someone takes him out. He’s tried to kill almost every member of my club at one time or another, as well as our old ladies. I’ll kill him and sleep like a baby.

Haze and Vapor put Ben in one of the vans and corral the puppies in an old wash tub from the barn. The rest of us get down to the business of torching Pope’s property. He had a large fuel tank and a meth cooking unit, so he might just think something went terribly wrong with that operation when he sees the smoke.

We'd disabled his security before we stormed his property wanting the element of surprise, so now it's a case of waiting until word gets out that the farm is on fire. Zen is tracking Pope's cell phone and after about two hours, he tells us that he's making his way to his little wilderness retreat at breakneck speed. When he starts driving down the dirt road toward his house, we can see he's not alone. He has a police car and three pickups totally full of men.

"Looks like there at least fourteen men, including the ones standing up in the backs of the trucks with rifles," I say as I watch through my binoculars.

"Well, there's a dozen of us. That's not even gonna be a fair fight," Siege replies. "It's a shame we've got to take out so many. You sure you don't want to show restraint and just make sure they get locked up instead of killed?"

I shoot Siege and an annoyed look "Who in the hell are we supposed to call to arrest them? This dude is the highest-ranking police officer in our town. If ever there was a situation that justified giving someone a fucking dirt nap, it's this one."

"We could call the highway patrol."

"And say what, that we stole a dead body off his property, a boy, that he may or may not have murdered, that he's dog fighting and had a bunch of valuables that we stole, before burning all his shit to the ground?"

Siege smothers back a smile. "Well, when you put it that, narking on ourselves doesn't seem like the brightest move."

The minute the vehicles pull up, we're all over them before they can even get to their weapons. Unfortunately, I recognize one fucker I don't want to kill, so our plan of shoot first ask questions later goes to hell. If he's got that dumbass then who else might be on a ride along

When we start pulling them out of the vehicles one by one, I curse under my breath when I get to Tracker. "What in the fuck are you doing hanging out with the syndicate? Your old man would be livid."

Tracker had a busted lip and a black eye. “Thank God you guys are here. I was about to be killed and used for chicken feed.”

I snort a laugh, but it’s Siege’s amused voice that speaks up. “How did you get messed up with these guys?”

“A cop found me at your bar and decided I was moonlighting as a member of the Savage Legion. They were pretty pissed when I didn’t have any intel for them.”

“Where’s Pope?”

“Like I know anything. I’m their fucking hostage, remember?”

“You’re like a bad penny that always turns up,” I respond thinking how disappointed I’d be if Tracker was my kid.

“That’s not the first time someone’s ever told me that.” I hear him mumble.

Tank yells, “I’ve got him. One syndicate head honcho coming right up.”

We line all the others up with their backs to us and focus on Pope.

By the time Siege and I make it to him, he’s spitting mad. “You fuckers burned my house down?”

“Don’t know what you’re talking about. It was on fire when we got here, looks like your meth cooks fucked up. What’s with bringing the cavalry?”

Tank’s amused voice answers my question. “He wasn’t bringing anybody. I found him locked in the trunk of his own car.”

“Ah, you ended up with a little mutiny on your hands, did you, Pope?”

“Fuck all the way off,” he spits back.

I stomp over to the small group of law men. Three are wearing police uniforms. “Which one of you is in charge?”

An older man steps forward.

It takes me a minute to realize who he is. “Is that you Rufus?”

“Yeah, that’s me. You and your boys are putting a crimp in my day.”

“I haven’t seen you for at least seven years, and the last time I talked to you, you were about as far away from a cop as a person could be.” Rufus was an old friend of Siege’s father, our paths used to cross frequently until he ran afoul of the law.

The older man shrugs. “It’s camouflage, nothin’ more.”

“What the hell are you doing here Rufus?” Siege asks.

“I got out of prison three days ago. Looking for my boy, my grandson, got word that he was here.”

Shock roils through my gut. “Ben was your grandson?”

Rufus points at Pope. “Yeah, he was. And that fucker right there killed him.”

I gesture at the long line of men in front of what was once Pope’s home. “Are you saying that all these men are yours?”

“Not Tracker. When we found Pope, he had knocked that one out and was dragging him out the back door of a bar in town. We took them both just on the off chance the boy knew something useful. Once he woke up, we realized he didn’t have any useful thoughts at all.”

“Yeah, I wanna argue that one,” Tracker says.

“Want to tell us how you got onto Pope?” I ask, curious as to how Rufus ended up here.

“Got word in prison, some guy called Charlie wanted to come visit me, said he had some useful information. Told me my Benny hadn’t run off, that he’d been killed, and he knew who did it. He told me about that dirty cop and said he had some leverage on the man and wanted me and my men to come into business with him. He reckoned with what he knew, he could take over the organization and would split the proceeds with me.”

“What did he know?” I ask, though I know full well, after Evan told us earlier.

“He wouldn’t tell me, said once I got released, he’d tell me everything. I didn’t trust the bastard, but I wanted answers, so I let him believe I was interested.”

We still hadn’t found any trace of Charlie Boyles, I had a feeling that Rufus might know something about the man’s fate, “When did you last see him?”

“He met me two days ago after I got out. Started telling me about this kid he’s been holding captive for months who knew stuff that could destroy Pope—made me sick I tell you, I was all but ready to put a bullet in the fucker’s brain, but I had to hang fire.”

Siege nods in understanding, “We’ve been looking for Charlie, you happen to know where he is?”

“Taking a dirt nap in the desert.” Rufus says with a look of satisfaction.

Well, that’s one less fucker I have to hunt down and kill.

“We found your grandson. He was buried behind the barn. We were taking him for a proper burial,” Siege says solemnly.

“I’ll take him if you don’t mind. Our family burys our own, we have a family cemetery. His parents are gonna be destroyed, but we all knew a good kid like him wouldn’t just run away. When I got word about what happened, I had to see for myself before I broke the news to them.” Rufus says.

I speak up, “If you have a funeral, Evan would like to attend. He’s the one who sent us here to look for Ben. They were good friends.”

“He’s the kid that Charlie took? When I met up with him and he took me out to the shack, he was mighty pissed the kid had done a runner. Once I knew the kid had gotten away, I had no other use for him, so I shot the fucker, got me some men together and went after Pope. Is the boy okay?”

“He will be.”

“Poor kid,” Rufus says.



I reach into my pocket and pull out one of our club's business cards. "Here, my number is on the back. Call us and we'll come out."

"I want the fucker who killed him. That crazy fucker needs to pay for his crime."

Siege nods. "I wholeheartedly agree. We're of like minds on that. The thing is this bastard has done more than just kill your grandson."

"What are you saying? That you're not going to give him to me?"

"We'll hand him over to you, but I want some kind of verification that he's dead," I explain.

Rufus smiles. "That'll be easy enough. When you come for the funeral, you can see the dead body. Does that sound fair?"

"Yeah, but that fucker is responsible for a bunch of missing kids. We need to interrogate him before you have him."

"Missing kids?"

"His organization has been selling them to pedophiles. They've been trafficking women and men too. This fucker has his fingers in a lot of nasty pies. The Feds have shut down the trafficking side of the operation and most of the perpetrators are in jail or awaiting trial. But we still have a bunch of missing kids, he dies, and the intel dies with him."

"I'll take him with me now. Tonight, you come out to my place, and we interrogate him together. The longer he lasts, the better for both of us." Glancing at Siege, he asks, "Your club down with that plan?"

Siege nods his agreement. I would have preferred to choke the fucking life out of him myself, but Rufus deserve to kill him more than I did, so I'll have to be satisfied with participating in the interrogation.

Sticking out my hand, I say, "Yeah, that's fair enough for me. Don't get started without me, though. I want to find those missing kids and this fucker is the last man alive who knows what happened to them."

Pope has been quiet up until this point, but all of a sudden, he takes off running, trying to get between Rufus and me. I slam my arm into his throat, and he goes down like a lead balloon.

Rufus shoots me a dirty look, grabs Pope up by the arm, and throws him to another of his men.

Siege asks, “Did your family have a hard time while you were locked up?”

Rufus looks pained. “Yeah, my no good son-in-law kept getting fired from jobs, and with me locked up I couldn’t help them. That’s why Ben was working weekends. He was a good kid and look where that got him.”

Siege holds out one of the pillowcases. “Here, maybe this will help.”

Rufus’ eyes light up. “What ya got there, Siege? It looks like loot.” He takes hold of the bag and peers inside. “Well now, your old man would be mighty proud of you helping out one of his friends during his time of need.”

Siege snorts a laugh. “Loot is free money, and I know all too well that having you and your men as allies beats the hell out of having you as enemies.”

The older man shoots Siege an indulgent smile. “I always did like the Legion. You know that, Siege.” Jerking his chin at Tracker, he asks, “You want me to get rid of that Hound for you?”

“Believe it or not, that’s King’s grandson.”

Rufus throws back his head and laughs. “Well, he sure as hell didn’t end up with the old man’s sharp brain, that’s for damn sure.”

Siege glances over at Tracker. “He ain’t bad. I have a feeling that one day he will come into his own and be a match for any of us.”

Rufus slaps Siege on the shoulder. “We’ll see what happens then. Good seein’ you again, Siege.” When he passes me, he says, “Later, preacher.”

“Later, Rufus. You say hello to that old lady of yours from me.”

Rufus just threw up his middle finger without looking back at me. I chuckle, Rufus never did change. He was just like I remembered him being when he hung out with Claw all those years ago.

I turn to Siege and hand him the other pillowcase of loot in my hand.

He shoves it back at me. “You always take your ten percent right off the top. Want to look through this when we get back to the clubhouse?”

“Not this time, brother. I wouldn’t feel right about it. Not with you all putting your lives on the line for Mattie and Evan. I don’t want anything that ties me to this place.”

A look of understanding crosses Siege’s face. “Can’t say I blame you, brother.”

“I’m sure you’ll find a good cause to spend it on. You always do.”

“You know it, brother. Are you heading back now?” Siege asks.

I nod, feeling relief, sadness, and a multitude of other emotions filling up my soul. “I just need some time to myself before I go back to Mattie and Evan. I don’t want to drag home the ugliness of this situation.”

“I’ll call and check on you later.”

“That would be great, brother.” I walk away from the still burning building and get on my bike.

Within moments I’m on the highway and slowly heading home. The wind blowing through my clothing is refreshing, flushing the smell of smoke and death away, cleansing and purifying me.

The realization slowly set in that this situation with the syndicate is finally over, once and for all. My Mattie and I can keep looking for the missing kids without worrying about the syndicate getting in the way. Once I beat some information out

of Pope, our chances of finding them would increase exponentially. The thought of being able to recover more of them made my heart sing with excitement and happiness. We were a good team, my Mattie and me. Those kids need us, and we won't stop looking until we track down every single one of them. Dead or alive, we'd find them and get their families some closure.

## Chapter 22

### *Mattie*

I'm sitting at the bar, sipping a virgin cocktail with one hand, while my other hand is in my pocket, wrapped around a pregnancy test. Cleo brought it to me around an hour ago, and I'm still trying to wrap my head around what I've just learned. I've had the birth control implant for three years and it's always worked like a charm. Well, I assumed so, but since I had the implant inserted, I'd not had sex—at least I hadn't, until getting together with Rigs.

I thought I was safe, that was until Cleo and I were having a girly chat, and she reminded me that it was closer to five years since I'd gotten the implant. With everything going on at work and with the syndicate, I guess I'd let a lot of stuff slip. Like not scheduling an appointment with my OB-GYN to get a new implant fitted. One rapid response test later, and my world has changed thanks to my hot biker's strong swimmers. It's still early days as far as the pregnancy goes, but I know this is what I want.

I'd watched women all around me gush over their pregnancies. Having children has been a pie in the sky dream that I kept on the back burner, my neurologist had said that my MS shouldn't impact on my fertility or ability to be a mom, but I'd assumed that it would never happen. But seeing that line appear on the test suddenly made my future look a whole lot different. Now it was my turn to get what Cleo and my other co-workers had. I was relishing every single moment of it. Somehow, I know Rigs will be thrilled when I tell him the news, even though it's the last thing we expected.

I take another sip of my drink and watch as Evan continues pacing by the front door. He's been doing that ever since Rigs and his brothers left. I don't know exactly what he'd talked to the brothers about, but he's been nervous since they left. I wish I could take away all of his pain and anxiety. Unfortunately, the best I can do is be a sympathetic ear if and when he wants

to talk, and make sure he has a good therapist to help him work through all the terrible things that have happened to him. I'm worried how Evan will take the news of my pregnancy more than Rigs, we want him to have a settled life, and I hope he doesn't think this is going to change my plans of adopting him.

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Evan runs to Rigs as soon as he walks in. Whatever he says makes Evan hang his head and wipe at his eyes with the backs of his hands. Then Evan turns and runs upstairs, presumably to our suite.

Rigs looks over at me and smiles, but instead of coming closer, he follows Evan upstairs. I hastily get up from my seat and rush after them.

By the time I make it to our living area, I hear the shower running and Evan sobbing in the bedroom with the door closed. Something in my gut tells me to leave Evan alone until I talk to Rigs. He clearly needs a moment to himself. So, I pace around the living room until Rigs comes out of the bathroom wearing clean jeans and a button-up shirt.

I immediately ask, "What happened? Why is Evan so upset?"

Rigs takes me by the hand and leads me to the sofa. Once we're sitting side by side, he explains. "Pope was after Evan because he witnessed him kill one of his friends. We tracked down where Pope lives and found the kid's body in a shallow grave, right where Evan said he would be. His family claimed the body, we captured Pope, and we're going to interrogate him later tonight. With any luck, we might get good intel on what happened to the rest of the missing children."

I'm shocked by what I was hearing. "I'm glad Evan is finally able to grieve for his friend. I think I should go check on him," I say, and stand up.

"No." Rigs pulls me back down. "Leave him be for now, sugar. He's a strong boy, but this has been an emotional day for him, on top of everything he's already been through."

“So, Popelstone, Pope, was the last member of the syndicate, right?”

“Yeah, we searched his house and didn’t find any evidence that he was part of a larger network. It seems like a regional organization that had a chokehold on key positions in local government that enabled them to neutralize every single person they saw as a potential threat to their organization.”

“You just never think anything like this can happen in a small town where most of us know each other.”

“Well, you sure as hell can’t tell who the bad guys are just by looking. If we could, it would make life a whole damn lot easier.”

The social worker in me knows that is all too true. Most of the brothers in the Savage Legion look like they could be criminals, but most were war heroes. That police chief looks like a hero and was most definitely a villain. I learned long ago not to judge a book by its cover.

I glance up at Rigs. “You look exhausted. Do you want to take a nap before we have to go out to interrogate Pope?”

He stared at me in shock. “No.”

“But—”

“But nothing. I don’t want you within a million miles of this situation.”

“I’m the one who has every one of those cases memorized. That means I’m the only one who knows what questions to ask for the best chance of recovering them. You need me.”

“Mattie, sugar, you’ve got to know that getting information out of a man like Pope will require more than polite questioning.”

I just stare at him. What had I imagined an interrogation to look like? Shining a light in his face and shouting rapid fire questions at him until he broke and told us everything we wanted to know? Looking at Rigs’ face told me it was going to be more like slapping him around, breaking a few fingers, and whatever else it took to get him to talk. A sick feeling swirls in

my stomach because I know he isn't going to admit to anything without that kind of persuasion.

Still, I'm those kids' best chance of being found. I'm not about to let them stay in whatever hells they were trapped in simply because I'm too squeamish to see what it takes to motivate answers out of a scumbag like Pope.

Lifting my chin, I say, "I don't care what it takes. I'm all in."

Rigs' face falls. "Mattie, no. This isn't you."

I take his hand and press it against my stomach. "It's the new me. I'm going to find every single one of these kids before I give birth to my own, so help me God."

Rigs' mouth falls open in shock and then he scoots closer. "You're carrying our child?"

I reach into my pocket and pull out the test.

As he gazes down at it, a slow smile spreads over his face. "We're going to be parents again," he said excitedly.

I like that he saw Evan as our child even though we haven't gone through the official process of adopting him yet.

Suddenly, his arms are around me, lifting me onto his lap and hugging me close. "I love you so much, Mattie. More than I've ever loved anyone before. We're going to be the best parents two kids ever had."

I lay my cheek against his chest. "Or more than two. Who knows what fate has in store for us?"

Rigs pulls back and tilts my head up to look into my eyes. "What are you saying, sugar? You want to adopt all the kids who no longer have homes to go back to?"

I absolutely do, but admitting something like that seemed so wild and unhinged. I close my eyes and tell myself it isn't logical, much less possible.

While I was trying to talk myself out of it, Rigs says, "We're going to need a much bigger house than the ones I've earmarked for you to look at."



My eye pop open. “Are you serious? Don’t you think that idea is a little ambitious? We don’t have enough money to take care of so many kids.”

“You may not have enough money, but I’m fairly wealthy. I’m one of the founding members of this club and the only one who works here full-time. I’ve been getting ten percent of every job since I was a teen.” Gesturing around his suite, he says, “As you can see, I don’t spend much on myself. Trust me, sugar, out of all the things we have to worry about in life, money isn’t one.”

“Oh. Oh, I see. Do the folks around here know you’re loaded? Is that why every club girl in the clubhouse has warned me that you’re spoken for?”

He snorts a laugh. “Nope. You’re the only person I’ve ever told about that. I can almost guarantee Siege doesn’t even know how much money I have, and he’s our club president.” Giving me a wicked smile, he adds, “Those club girls just like my pierced cock.”

I burst out laughing because this rich hot biker of mine was not wrong about his magnificent cock. “Well, the baby maker’s all mine now.”

I watch his expression turn heated. God, I wanted to have sex with him so badly, but now was not the time. “Too bad we have that interrogation coming up or we could celebrate.”

“Mattie, are you sure about this?”

“Yes, and I don’t want to argue about it. Whatever it takes to find those kids is what I’m going to do.”

H rests his hand on my belly. “Fine, but I don’t want you within striking distance of this cruel fucker.”

I hold up both hands in a gesture of capitulation. “I promise not to come too close to him. I just need to look him in the eye and ask my questions.”

“Alright, sugar. If you change your mind before or after, just say the word and I’ll get you out of there.”

“You’re going to get the other kids back?” Evan asks from the doorway, startling me and Rigs.

Rigs motions Evan over to sit with us. “Yeah, we’re going to have a little talk with the police chief and get him to tell us what he did with the others.”

“I remember something Ben told me. Something that really tore him up.”

I dread what’s going to come out of his mouth because I knew it had to be something horrible.

“What is it, Evan. So far, the things you’ve told us has not only checked out, but been incredibly helpful in taking Pope down,” Rigs says.

Evan leans forward slightly. “Ben told me that he overheard the chief tell one of his men that the birth certificates went in the safe at the precinct. He thought the chief was talking about his horses, because they are pedigree. I think it makes more sense that those birth certificates belonged to kids rather than animals, even if they were worth a lot.”

Rigs pats him on the back. “Kiddo, you just gave us the best intel we’ve had so far to help find the others. Thank you, Evan. You’re proving to be a Godsend to us right now. Looks like I’ve got me a little job to do before I have a chat with Pope later on.”

Some of the anxiety and darkness lifts from Evan’s expression. “Do you really think you can find them?”

“Yes. We found you. We can find them,” I answer firmly.

“And you’re gonna keep them? I’ll have brothers and sisters?”

I nod. “Maybe, but we hope that they can all be returned to their families. But you will be having a brother or a sister in eight months’ time.”

Evan stares at my belly. “You sure about that, Mattie? You don’t look pregnant.”

I hold up the test. “This says I am, but I’ll still need to get checked out by a doctor to be sure.”

“Oh wow, my grandma is going to be happy.”

“You’ve been talking to your grandmother?” I say, totally bewildered.

He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a cell phone. “Haze gave me a burner phone from the club stock. He said I could have it, so first thing I did was call the nursing home.”

“How is your grandma? Does she need anything?” Rigs asks.

“She’s alright. She couldn’t stop crying when she found out I was okay. Wanted me to say hello and thank you for looking after me.”

“Tell her that we’ll take you out to visit her real soon,” I add. We need to talk to his grandmother about the adoption. We’ll be his foster family for as long as he needs, but now we know his grandmother is alive we can discuss the formal adoption details with her.

“Can I go with you to talk to Pope tonight?” Evan asks expectantly.

“Absolutely not,” Rigs and I answer at the same time.

“Okay. Just be careful when you go to his office, he’s got all the police working on his side.”

“Don’t worry kiddo, we’ve dealt with worse, and I think now he’s out of the picture, the precinct’s getting a long overdue clean up. We’ll always be here to take care of you, and I’m not gonna do anything to threaten that. You’re part of our family now,” Rigs says.

Evan smiles. “My grandma is really happy I’m getting looked after by nice people instead of assholes like Mr. Strawn.”

“Do you think Strawn had anything to do with you getting abducted or was that all your old case worker?”

Evan shakes his head. “I didn’t get the feeling Mr. Strawn knew anything about the syndicate. He was all wrapped up in being the world’s strictest teacher. None of the kids could stand him.”

“Great. That’s on less ass I have to kick tonight,” Rigs grins.

Evan chuckles. “Mr. Strawn thought he was a real badass, but I’ll bet you could beat him up with one hand tied behind your back.”

Rigs laughs as he heads toward the door. “You two be sure to get some dinner. Mattie, I’ll see you later at Rufus’ house.”

With that, the love of my life strolls out the door to go steal confidential information from the police chief’s office. Him being in danger worries me greatly.

“You look scared, Mattie.” Evan says, sounding years older than the teen he was. “Rigs is going to be fine. He’s tough and knows how to get things done. Haze told me he was in the military and is trained to kill.”

My sweet Rigs was in the military, but he wasn’t trained to kill. He was trained to be a minister. I didn’t want to tell Evan that and have him worry, so instead I say, “Thanks, Evan. That was a really nice thing to say, and I appreciate it more than you know.”

“We should do as Rigs said and go get some dinner. You’re eating for two now, right?” He says glancing down at my belly.

Evan’s excitement over the baby gives me faith that he is going to overcome all the obstacles he’s had thrown in his path and turn out to be strong and resourceful. Heck, he already is strong, resilient, and resourceful to have survived Pope wanting to kill him.

“And you too, you’re still trying to build up strength after being held captive. What do you want for dinner? I reckon they might have a nice salad.”

“Yuck, no green food, I want a burger. I was thinking of burgers every day I was in that hut.”

“Okay, burgers it is,” I say.

“And candy for dessert?” He asks hopefully.

“Obviously, we can raid my snack duffel.”

“Yay,” I look over, Evan has been to hell and back and I know it’s not going to be an easy recovery, but hearing the teenage enthusiasm coming out of him gives me hope that he’ll be okay. We’ll all be okay.

## Chapter 23

### *Rigs*

I had told Evan, that now Pope was out of the picture, then the precinct would be a safer place. I didn't tell him that as far as his goons are concerned, he is still in charge, so this wasn't gonna be easy. One of our prospects, Jamie, has an older brother who works at the precinct in booking or some shit like that, and he says he can get us in. I initially have visions of me being marched through the building in handcuffs to the chief's office, me cracking open the safe and making off with the goods. It sounds like a reasonable plan in my head, but Brent thinks I've lost my freaking mind. He tells me as well as being the booking clerk, he's the precinct fire officer and he can clear the building, get the stuff I want and all I have to do is keep my ass out of sight. He takes the key and goes on a stealth mission all by himself.

I don't know how long I thought it was going to take him to make his way into the chief's office and clean out the safe. But I settle in for the long haul in the van.

He's been in the office for about five minutes when the fire alarm sounds. It's a loud grating noise that I can hear all the way out in the parking lot. Naturally, tons of people come pouring out of the building. It's interesting to see how they break up into several groups and go to different designated areas and I realize they have some kind of protocol in place. A few late stragglers make their way out and join the groups. Ten minutes later I see Brent come out as well. He's holding a stopwatch and carrying a briefcase and a clipboard.

"Not bad, full office evacuation in three minutes and twenty-two seconds, Johnson, Rodriguez, and Carver," he looks at the stragglers "If this hadn't been a drill then you'd all be dead or suffering from smoke inhalation. You hear the alarm, and you leave. You do not stop to pick up your lunch, or finish writing that email. Understood?"

The men look suitably chagrined.

I watch him calling out names and checking off some kind of list. I'm assuming he must have already cracked the safe and the information I need is tucked away in the briefcase he's carrying. After he's finished checking off the names on his list, Brent says some suitably encouraging words, and everyone files back into the building. Once he's alone in the yard he walks over to where I'm waiting and nods toward the van. Opening the briefcase, he shows me what's inside, there's a stack of official looking documents. I'm guessing these are the birth certificates we're looking for and maybe some other stuff that could be helpful.

I hold a trash bag open, and he dumps the contents of his briefcase into it, then looks up at me. "Siege told me how important this information is. I hope it turns out to be everything you're looking for."

"Thanks, man. We appreciate your help."

"Good luck finding those kids. I gotta get back inside before anyone misses me, thought I'd gotten caught for a moment, I was in the chief's office and I heard a noise, turned out to be fucking Officer Carver eating his lunch wearing his fucking earbuds oblivious to the fact that the precinct could be up in flames around him."

Once he's gone, I tie up the bag and head back to the clubhouse. It's funny how some jobs are incredibly complex, dangerous and time-consuming and others happen quickly without a hitch.

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I haul the bag into my office and text Siege and Mattie to come and have a look. Mattie is there in the blink of an eye, Evan by her side. I didn't want him to be involved, he's been through enough without learning the depravity of what his captors were involved in, but I guess he's old enough to know his own mind. Going through everything, we realize there are many more kids missing than we originally thought. There are over fifty birth certificates, stretching back almost twenty years. One of them I recognize from a cold case featured on a

national television show a few years back. It seems like our tri-county area has been a black hole of missing kids for ages and no one noticed.

Mattie begins making a list of all the names and dates of birth, and I send the names to Zen so he can begin digging up information on them.

Siege finally walks in, with Dutch trailing behind him.

“How can there be so many we didn’t know about?” Siege asks.

Mattie responds, “We were only looking for the ones who came through CPS. If CPS wasn’t involved, how could we know?”

“A member of the syndicate was trying to get his hands on Joy and my son for years. If they had managed to find them, neither would have been on anyone’s radar. I’m surprised to find a bunch of other people went missing over the years that no one knew about,” Dutch says sadly.

“Cleo mentioned to me once that she thought there might be more, but I never once suspected there were so many.” Glancing at his watch, Siege says, “We really should get going to meet Rufus. I told him we were bringing Mattie, and he wasn’t wild about there being another witness, but he agreed to let her in.”

I expect my Mattie to say something, but she was still scribbling down notes.

Vapor and Haze stick their heads in the doorway. “We came to see if Evan wants to hang out with us tonight. We’re doing dropping some ink on a guy from Heartsford,” Haze says by way of explanation.

Evan jumps up excitedly. “Cool! You mean I can go to the tattoo parlor with you?”

“Yeah, I even brought you my old dirt bike,” Vapor says. “It’s street legal. We thought you might want to go for a ride afterward.”

Mattie gasped at that suggestion.



“Only in our parking lot, not on the road.” Vapor quickly adds.

Evan looks at me and then Mattie. “Can I go?”

Seeing the pleading in his eyes was too much for me.

“Yes, but no riding outside the parking lot,” Mattie says looking at Evan and then at Vapor like she was sure my club brother was gonna take the kid on the highway.

“Awesome!” he says before eagerly following the two youngest brothers in our club.

I give Mattie an approving smile. She was good at being firm but fair. And Evan responded so well to her authority, probably because he trusts that she has his best interests at heart. I was so fuckin’ proud of her, in a thousand different ways. Most especially because she was carrying my baby. I couldn’t wait to see her belly rounded with our child. She was beautiful and would be even more so, heavy with the baby made by our love.

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It took us about an hour and half to get to Rufus’ house. He met us outside. “Welcome, Rigs.”

“Thank you. This is my old lady, Mattie.”

“Ah, the social worker. Welcome Mattie.”

“Thank you, sir. I wish we were meeting under better circumstances.”

He nods in agreement. “If you’ll follow me. The sooner we get started, the sooner we can get this over with.”

He leads us into the house, through the kitchen, and down into the basement. Pope is chained to a chair that was bolted to the floor. I suspect Rufus hasn’t beaten the shit out of Pope because he knew Mattie was coming. He was pretty old school that way. My best guess is he’ll save the blood sport for after Mattie leaves.

Siege pushes off the wall and walks over to us. “Looks like everyone is present and accounted for. Shall we get started?”

I step in front of Pope. “The gig’s up for you, I’m afraid. The Savage Legion has taken out every leader in your organization and now we have you at our mercy.”

“You’re waiting your time. You might as well kill me because I’m not going to give you the satisfaction of telling you anything.”

I squat down to look him in the eye. “Yes, you are. You might be talented at trafficking innocent women and kids and all manner of depraved shit, but I’m only good at one thing. That’s getting people to spill their guts before I do.”

“You sure fucking love to hear yourself talk, don’t you, preacher?”

“I’d rather hear you talk, but I get the feeling you’re going to be difficult. So, here’s what I’m going to do. You’ve got one opportunity to answer the questions my old lady puts to you, and if you don’t, you get to answer my questions. Trust me, you’re not gonna want me asking the questions.”

“Damn biker trash. You idiots like to talk tough, but you’re not stupid enough to hurt me. I’m in charge of this town. My officers will hunt you to the ends of the earth if you kill me.”

“Want to bet on it? What with the evidence we have from your safe, Ben’s body and the video he filmed, then no one’s gonna do anything you say, unless they want to share a cell with you.”

He gasps at that. I was lying about the video, but he doesn’t need to know that. He quickly rearranges his expression and looks like the fucking defiant pig that he is.

I punch him in the nuts just to get our little chat rolling. His scream was long and shrill. When he finally quieted down, I said, “Let’s start again. My Mattie is going to ask you questions and you’re going to answer them. Are we clear?”

“Fuck off, outlaw.”

I give him three quick punches to the crotch and watch him writhe in pain for a while. I’m not happy about Mattie seeing this side of me, but she insisted she had to be here. I’m hoping that she’ll forget about it, once we’re done with Pope. “No

man likes taking a hit to the balls, and you just took four punches with my iron fist. You'd be stupid to keep refusing."

"Fucking fine. Let her ask her damn questions."

Mattie asks her questions, but this fucker was evasive. It takes a few more skillfully applied punches and other forms of physical persuasion to get the information she needs. Finally, after almost two hours she gets her answers. Then Siege takes her upstairs to have coffee with Rufus' wife.

Now it's my turn to drill down on him and this time I don't have to be on my best behavior. "How many do you think are alive right now?"

"Most of them. The people I sold to aren't rich. They value their merchandise and would probably take special care not to break it."

I grab him by the hair and yank his head back. "By it you mean kids, right? You sick motherfucker."

"Yeah, fuck. I meant kids. Fucking hell, you're vicious for a man who wears such a big cross."

I smile at him, grab my cross and jab it into his eye socket. He lets out a blood curdling scream. Even though I am a spiritual person, that doesn't mean I won't hurt him. By the time I'm finished with him he'll be repenting his sins. I wipe the end of it clean on my shirt, as he's screaming and writhing on the chair with blood running down his face.

"What the fuck was that?" Pope stammers.

"We're not talking about me. We're talking about you. Now, give me the names of every person on the list that you know is dead."

"Shit, I don't know. The first three I sold to a mobster in New York, and he decided to raise the kids to be on his payroll. They made it to adulthood but died in a shootout defending him. Then there was Gordon Kingsley, who died in a riptide when his family took him to the beach one year. He was ten at the time."

"Anyone else?"

“Shit, give me a fucking minute. I haven’t thought about most of these people in years.”

Eventually after more persuasion, he gives me sixteen names. He has logical excuses for what happened to all of them, but I’m sure there’s more to their stories than what he was telling us. That was fine, because I wouldn’t stop until I knew for sure what happened to each of them.

When I’m satisfied that I’ve gotten all the information I can from him, I step back and let Rufus take over.

“So, what in the fuck made you think you could get away with killing my grandson? Did you honestly think I wouldn’t get out and come looking for you one day?”

“How did you know I killed him?”

“One of your syndicate cronies came looking for me with a proposition. He told me what you’d done to Ben.”

“That’s bullshit.”

Rufus punches him so hard that Pope’s head slams to the side. “Charlie Boyles, remember him? Fucker is swimming with the fishes now, but not before he told me what you’d done to Ben. He saw you set the dogs on that woman and when you realized he knew, you came for him. My grandson was barely thirteen years old, you twisted fuck. “Ben didn’t deserve all the shit you put him through or to get his head bashed in by you.”

“It wasn’t me.”

“Yes, it was. My kid, Evan saw you bash him on the head with a rock. That’s why you came to the hearing, you thought he was dead, and you wanted to finish the job.”

“Stupid little shit should have been.”

I was about to punch him again, but Rufus got in there first. “Wanna know why your man didn’t kill him?”

Pope looks exhausted and confused by the beating, but he fixes his good eye to Rufus, “Why?”

“Boyle learned what had gone down, he was Ben’s friend’s case worker at CPS and when Evan got scared, he was the only person he trusted. Bad mistake, but luckily for us, Charlie-boy thought it would be something to hold over you, and he had an idea of taking over control of operations.” Rufus says.

“Fool,” Pope spits out.

“That’s as may be, but look where you are now.”

“How long are you planning to drag this out for?” Siege interrupts.

“All fucking night. We’re holding Ben’s funeral here at the homestead tomorrow at four in the afternoon. If you and Rigs want to take off, you can view the dead body tomorrow before the funeral.”

I nod. “I’d like to get my missus home so she can rest.”

“You’ve got a nice lady there. Any woman who would come down and help interrogate a piece of shit like this to save some kids is worth worshipping.”

“Thanks, Rufus. You’ve always been good people.”

I head upstairs and can hear Siege saying his goodbyes behind me. We say our goodbyes to Rufus’ wife and head back to the clubhouse. On the ride home, Mattie and I talk about the additional information I’d recovered. It has been a long day and I want nothing more than bed down with the woman I love and sleep for a million years.

# *Epilogue*

## *Mattie*

**I**n the four months since Ben's funeral, Evan has been dealing with the grief of his friend's death. He's been hanging around a lot with Haze and Vapor. They are both nineteen and good role models. We've discovered Evan has a real talent for drawing, and coupled with his interest in tattoos, he was spending a lot of time hanging around the tattoo shop. I wasn't sure I wanted him to have a career as a tattooist as he was such a bright boy, and it seemed a waste of his talents. But after learning more about the trade I realized it was as worthwhile a career as any. He is still in two minds, but he's definitely decided he wants to go to art school. He was way too young to actually tattoo anyone, but he could practice drawing tattoos and develop a portfolio of original designs.

Law enforcement found Pope's body at the bottom of a local lake. Cause of death was massive trauma from an automobile accident where he didn't seem to be wearing a seat belt. I couldn't tell if the Savage Legion had a hand in this or not. I suspected they had, but I didn't care. Pope was history and couldn't ever hurt Evan again. That was all that mattered to me. I was the kind of person who reserved all my empathy for the innocent rather than the people trying kill them.

Waking up in our lovely new home with Rigs every morning was a privilege, and I was careful to never take what I had for granted. Weekends were the best because we could sleep in and cuddle.

Rigs had been absolutely insatiable since my baby bump began to show. And my pregnancy hormones were making my libido spike. So when he pulls me back against his cock, I wiggle myself into position.

Being almost five months pregnant meant I'm not uncomfortably large yet, but Rigs still takes special care when

we have sex. He has gentle hands and a rough cock. I was always wet and ready for him, especially in the mornings.

Unfortunately, my wiggling gets me nowhere because he whispers, "You know the rules, sugar. You have to come me for once before you get my cock."

That's not fair," I groan. "I'm already wet and ready. I'm carrying your child. Give me what I want."

I can feel his body stiffen against mine. "You don't play fair, do you? How about a compromise?"

He slides his thick, hard cock through my folds from behind until the fat head of his cock collides with my clit. I moan with pleasure and spread my legs. He reaches down and bumps his cock against my clit.

"Oh God, that feels so good, baby. Don't stop."

Instead of doing as I ask, he presses my legs together and begins sliding through my folds, hitting my clit over and over again until I'm shaking with need. It feels so good, but I want his cock inside me. So I decide to pull out all the stops, because my man loves to hear me talk dirty.

"I can feel your precum leaking all over my clit, feeling your thick cock sliding through my lips is making me soaking wet. Just think how good it would feel to have my pussy squeezing down on your shaft."

That's all it takes to push my hot biker over the edge. He rams his cock into me in one powerful thrust. "You never play fair, sugar. You always know what to say to get your way with me."

"I love feeling you come inside me, coating my pussy walls and dripping out of me, then feeling you fuck it back in again."

"Oh fuck, I love it when you talk dirty." He gasps while his cock is hitting me deep.

"No one's ever filled me up like you do. My pussy is stretched tight."

“Babe, you’re gonna make me come too fast.” He hisses and I can feel his shaft twitching in me.

“There’s no such thing as too fast because my strong, sexy fiancé can just fuck right through it and get ready for round two without even pulling out.”

“I fucking love the feel of coming inside you while you orgasm. There is no better feeling in the world than knowing your body is open and welcoming my seed.”

When his finger taps my clit as he pushes deep and holds himself there, my entire body lights up with the hardest orgasm of my entire life. His other hand twists my nipple, and he whispers, “Just like that, sugar. Clamp down on my cock and let me fill you to overflowing with my seed.”

I just keep coming as he taps my clit, stringing out the orgasm for what feels like forever. When I relax back against his body, he pumps into me some more, only more gently this time. I’m so full of his come that it’s dripping out of my body. When he pulls out, he uses the sperm leaking out of my body to stroke another quick rough orgasm out of me.

I look over my shoulder at him and smile. “You’re an evil genius when it comes to sex.”

“You bring out the devil in me, sugar.”

“I love you.”

“I’m glad, because I have a special gift for you today.”

“I always think of your cock as a gift.”

He laughs. “It’s one of many I have planned for you, my love.”

He gets out of bed and heads for the bathroom and comes back wearing the long cross he always wears, and still hard. Before he can get into the bed, I sit up, reach for his cock, and suck it into my mouth. Every time I suck his cock, Rigs is always so surprised, but delighted. I take my time with him, just like he did with me, flicking my tongue over his piercing.

He runs one hand through my hair. It was his way of letting me know he’s about to come. I suck him deep and swallow a



couple of times until he comes with a gush down my throat.

I look up at him with a smile on my face like the cat that got the cream, his necklace is right in my face. Linked on the chain beside the cross are three rings. I sit up and reach for them.

“You found your gift.”

I finger through the rings and realize one is a large diamond engagement ring and the other two are fancy wedding bands with Celtic knot designs etched on them.

“You like them, sugar? They belonged to my grandmother. She willed them to me a long time ago and told me to save them for the right woman.”

“I love them. In fact, I’ve never seen anything so beautiful before.”

“They’re handmade and eighteen karat gold.” Lifting the chain off his neck, he carefully removes the engagement ring and slips it onto my finger.

“Oh, it fits perfectly. How strange is that?”

He chuckles. “Not very strange at all. I took one of your other rings and had it sized at a local jeweler.”

I give him a nice long kiss. After pulling back, I admire the way it looked on my hand. “You’re a man who doesn’t leave anything to chance.”

He sits on the bed and watches me admire his sweet gift. “Of course not. I’ve waited a lifetime to have a family. I plan to make sure they’re the happiest people on planet earth.”

“I don’t know about Evan and our unborn child, but you can consider me, mission accomplished. I absolutely adore everything about you.”

“You’re so good for my ego, Mattie. It’s so gratifying to have the woman I love the most feel the same way about me. I almost didn’t approach you at all. I thought you were too young, smart, and beautiful for someone like me. I was so fucking jealous that Dutch got asked to take you that Stupid fucking ball that I almost ripped his head off.”

“It was always you right from the start for me. Seriously, there was something about you that I just couldn’t put my finger on, something that made you stand out among all your brothers.”

“Would you have approached me if I hadn’t approached you first?”

I give him a rueful look. “I’m going to say maybe not. I wasn’t focused on dating back then. Plus, I thought you were totally out of my league. You were someone who had their life together, while my life was a mess. I have MS. Although it’s relatively well managed with medication, it still scares a lot of people off.”

“You seem to be doing really well.”

“I have flareups, I might be okay for a few months and then I might have problems. The condition is unpredictable, and I guess that’s why I gave up on dating.”

He shrugs. “We might all end up with mobility problems when we get old. You can’t live your life based on what might happen in the future, you know?”

I nod. “It’s hard having such a perfect husband when I’m anything but perfect myself.”

“I think you should know that I’m far from perfect. I killed one of the people on your list. He was a kid who went missing and then turned out to be a repeat offender pedophile when he grew up. It was kind of like the same situation with Pope. We needed the information he had so I interrogated him and then made sure he could never harm another child.”

“I can’t imagine you taking a human life if it could be avoided. You’re far too kind and decent to do something like that.”

“I used to take the dark deeds upon myself, so my club brothers didn’t have to. I wanted to protect them from the mental anguish of doing things that they could never forget.”

I cup his face and look deep into his eyes. “From now on, I don’t want you taking the darkness into yourself anymore.”

You're a good, decent man and you don't deserve to have all that garbage floating around in your head."

"I won't because I don't want any of the awfulness of those situations rubbing off on you, Evan, or our little one when she's born."

"I love you, baby. And I want you to find the same sense of peace you insist on us having. You've done your share of dark deeds. It's someone else's turn."

"I promise not to volunteer myself for anything like that again. Now that the FBI has taken over the missing children's cases, it's time for us to find a little peace and live our lives." Rigs kisses the top of my head gently.

"I'm still poking around, looking for leads. I meant what I said about not giving up until they're all found." Quite a few of the kids had been tracked down and reunited with their parents, some were adults and had almost forgotten their former lives. It hurt my heart to think about what kind of trauma they had been through. But hopefully the healing could now start. Rigs and I were still adamant that if any kids turned up who had no family, then we would take them in. We had more than enough love to go around.

"Of course, we're going to continue poking around on our own. I wouldn't have it any other way." Rigs says.

"So, when were you thinking about us tying the knot?"

"Today, tomorrow, next week, anytime you like really. What kind of wedding do you want?"

"Something small and intimate."

"Formal or informal?"

"Informal, of course. It's like you don't even know me."

"How about you wear kitten heels like you did for Dutch?"

I smack his chest playfully. "You are the most infuriatingly jealous man I have ever met. And how do you know I wore kitten heels? Were you spying on me?"

He rubs his chest and says, “I made Dutch tell me everything about your date that night. It was agonizing, but I couldn’t stand not knowing. I was obsessed with you and didn’t know how to handle it.”

“You are hands down the most attractive, smart, compassionate, and fun man I’ve ever met. Ever since I med you, I don’t even think about other men.”

He looks at me with big, innocent eyes. “You’re carrying my child. It biologically precludes you from thinking of anyone but the father.”

I shoot him a disbelieving look. “Tell me you don’t actually believe something that absurd.”

“No, I don’t. I’ll tell you what I do believe, though. If I lick your pretty pussy every single day, you’ll only be thinking of me and my devilishly talented tongue.”

I smile. “Rigs, you have a dirty mouth, and it’s not from licking my girly bits.”

His eyebrows shoot up. “Girly bits? I don’t have a nickname for my cock.”

I push him back onto the bed. “If we were coming up with nicknames for your cock, it would have to be something like the queen’s mount.” I throw one leg over his hip and sink down onto his hard cock. He gazes up at me as I begin moving up and down. “Do you get it?”

“Yes. You’re my queen and are welcome to ride to your heart’s content anytime you like.”

“That’s a generous offer. I plan to take you up on that night and day.”

This is the slow fuck we both need, where we look into each other’s eyes and really feel the connection between us. This is everything I ever wanted but never thought possible. Now that I have it, I am never letting it go. What Rigs and I have is worth fighting the world to keep. It is more important than anything else in my life. He is my love, the father of my children, and the glue that holds my happily ever after together.

**THE END**

*Hope you enjoyed the book!*

The next book in the Savage Legion MC

series is: [Smoke's Flame](#)

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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.

If you'd like to be notified of updates, teasers, and promotions, subscribe to [Aria's newsletter](#)