

Harley
Wylde

DEVIL'S FURY MC #13

STITCHES

Stitches (Devil's Fury MC 13)
A Dixie Reapers Bad Boys Romance
Harley Wylde

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Harley Wylde

Stitches (Devil's Fury MC 13)

A Dixie Reapers Bad Boys Romance

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Marci — My sister and her boyfriend had been my entire world, until I lost them both. Laura died, and Stitches walked away. I've lived in hell for the past seven years thanks to a brother who should have protected me. Instead, he used me to further his career, not caring whether I lived or died. Now Stitches is back, right in front of me. I always thought of him as an older brother, so why does he suddenly seem so sexy? What would Laura think if she knew I was falling for the man she'd loved?

Stitches — When I lost my woman and daughter, I walked away. I should have taken her little sister, Marci, with me. Instead I trusted her family. My mistake. If I'd checked on Marci, kept in touch, I'd have known she was in trouble. Now she's back in my life, battered and broken. The men who dared to hurt her will pay with their lives. Especially her older brother. I failed her before, but this time I'll get vengeance for all she's suffered. It never occurred to me I'd end up falling for her along the way. I only hope if Laura is watching over us, she'd approve, because I don't think I can hold myself back.

Prologue

Stitches

Ten Years Ago

I'd been to war. Patched up men who wouldn't survive. Operated on my club brothers when they couldn't go to a hospital. Through all the times I'd lost someone, I'd always buried those feelings deep. Until now.

The machines in the room were so loud I wanted to cover my ears. The nurse left with my baby. My precious angel who never had a chance to even draw a breath. I hadn't even looked at her. Laura's hand went limp in mine, and I realized there was far too much blood.

"Mr. Garrett, we need you to step outside," another nurse said. "Someone will come find you in the waiting room."

I didn't have to ask what was going on. Even though I'd been an Army medic, I'd gone to medical school and knew how bad this was. I knew I should make some calls, but I wasn't ready. Laura had two siblings. An older brother she seldom spoke to, and a younger sister who followed her like a shadow.

In a daze, I left the room and wandered to the waiting area. There was no one here to lean on. My club didn't know about Laura or our baby. I'd kept her away from them, worried she'd get caught up in the chaos of the Devil's Fury. No one could have predicted something like having a baby would be

just as harmful to her.

Unshed tears burned my throat. In my gut, I knew she wasn't going to pull through. She'd hated her life. Always said I was the best thing to happen to her. I never understood why. I was just an old soldier who was part of a motorcycle club, and I damn sure didn't walk on the right side of the law. Although things weren't quite so brutal these days. We'd scaled back as more of our members started families. Didn't mean trouble stayed away, though.

None of it mattered anymore. No amount of medical knowledge, or the state-of-the-art equipment at the hospital, could save the woman I cared for a great deal. I may not have loved her, but I'd have stayed by her side. I'd helped pay the rent on the house she shared with her little sister, made sure they had groceries, and paid the utilities when their money was a bit tight.

I'd come here today, thinking my little family was growing. Instead, I'd lost it all.

The moment the doctor came out to find me, I knew Laura was gone. It was written all over his face. I barely listened to what he had to say, then followed a nurse so I could say my final goodbyes. Sitting beside her bed, I took Laura's hand in mine and stared at the woman who should have been celebrating a new life right now.

The minutes ticked by, the hand on the clock sounding ominous in the otherwise quiet room. What could I have done differently? Logically, I knew these things sometimes happened. But I couldn't help but think I could have somehow saved them both. If I'd been there more often, or gotten her to the hospital sooner... No. I knew it wouldn't have mattered.

“I’m so sorry,” I murmured, leaning forward to kiss her forehead. Her skin had already begun to cool. I’d failed her. No, not just her. I glanced at her now much flatter belly. If there was a heaven, I knew they’d be there together. It gave me a small amount of comfort, but not much.

“Mr. Garrett, I’m sorry, but we need to move the... Um, your girlfriend,” a nurse said from the doorway. I gave Laura’s hand one final squeeze before I stood and left the room.

“I’ll make arrangements for both of them,” I said.

“Mr. Garrett, I know this is a bad time, but there’s some paperwork you need to complete. You may also want a certificate of stillbirth so you’ll have something with your daughter’s name on it. We understand if you’d like to come back in the morning to take care of it. I just needed to make sure you were aware of the situation.”

My daughter. My chest ached at the thought of little Rose. I hadn’t been able to hold her. “Can I see her? My daughter?”

The nurse hesitated only a moment. “Wait here. I’ll bring her to you.”

She hurried off and I glanced at Laura once more. She hadn’t seen our daughter either. The only thing making this somewhat bearable was knowing they were together. I had to believe it. I’d never given much thought to heaven and hell, figuring if either existed, I’d likely end up in the hotter place.

The nurse returned, and I held little Rose against my chest. She looked perfect, and even had a mop of dark hair. My beautiful little girl. The tears I’d successfully held back

until now started to fall down my cheeks. I'd gone to some of Laura's appointments, and I'd seen Rose on the ultrasound screen. This wasn't the same. Having her in my arms and knowing this would be the first and last time, made it feel like someone was ripping my insides apart.

By the time I handed her back, I wasn't sure how long I'd remain standing. I still needed to speak with Laura's family, but I didn't think I could face them. They wouldn't have the money to cover funeral expenses. I'd make sure to take care of it. Having a place to visit them would be nice, for all of us.

"Thank you," I said. "I'll come back tomorrow and find out what I need to do next."

She left, taking little Rose with her, and I saw others waiting in the hall to move Laura. I couldn't look at her again. If I did, I'd completely fall apart. I dried my cheeks, blew out a breath, and tried to pull myself together. By the time I walked out of the hospital, no one would be able to tell I'd just lost everything.

I swung my leg over the seat of my bike and pulled my phone out. I hadn't spoken to Laura's brother more than twice during the year we'd been together, but I did have his number in case of emergency. This certainly counted. He'd be pissed I hadn't called sooner. Maybe. Then again, he'd distanced himself from Laura and their baby sister.

He answered on the third ring. "Hello."

"Richard, this is Stitches. I'm calling about Laura." Shit. I felt like I'd been gargling rocks. My throat still hurt.

"What about her?" he asked.

“She died giving birth to Rose. Our daughter didn’t make it.” I should have been kinder in how I told him. I knew it. Couldn’t manage to muster the energy to really care.

Richard sighed and I heard the creak of a chair. He must have been at work still. “All right. I guess I’ll have to cover the burial.”

Seriously? That’s all he had to say when I told him his sister was gone? This fucking asshole! If he’d been in front of me, I’d have beaten the shit out of him.

“I’ll take care of it. Marci doesn’t know. She’s not old enough to live on her own.”

“Jesus,” Richard muttered. “Fine. I’ll go see her. Do me a favor and lose this number. I think you’ve already done enough damage to the family. Pretend you never knew any of us.” Without another word, he hung up. I stared at the phone for a moment, then did as he said and removed his contact info.

Sorry, Marci. I was too chickenshit to go see her. I knew that poor girl would break, and I didn’t think I could handle it right now. Or ever.

I started my bike and rode aimlessly for a while. By the time I got back to the compound, the sun had started to rise, and I still felt like I’d just lost part of myself. I’d sleep for a few hours, then make arrangements for Laura and Rose. And somehow, I’d keep it all from the club. I wasn’t ready for explanations, or their pity. Laura and Rose would always hold a special place in my heart. I only hoped they could forgive me for not being a better boyfriend and father.

Never again would I let myself get this close to

someone. I refused to fail anyone the way I'd let down Rose and Laura. If that meant being alone the rest of my life, so be it.

Chapter One

Stitches

Present Day

I couldn't believe Ram had returned to the Devil's Fury. Although the biggest surprise had been the women and teens he'd brought with him. Each had suffered horribly, and I'd given them some space the first week. Badger had agreed they would be too skittish for me to attempt giving them an exam. It wasn't the first time I'd used my medical knowledge for the sake of my brothers or their women. Now I was on the last woman, and nothing could have prepared me to come face-to-face with Marci again. Now all grown up and looking more haunted than any woman should. It had been ten years since I'd last seen her, which meant she was in her early twenties now. My stomach twisted. How the hell had she gotten mixed up in all this? And why hadn't I known? I had so many questions.

She wouldn't look at me. Couldn't say I blamed her. If it weren't for me knocking up her sister, Laura might have still been alive. I might not have liked their brother, Richard, but I'd thought he would at least make sure Marci had a decent life. I hadn't seen a single poster around town about her being missing. Not a peep on the local news or radio. How long ago had she been kidnapped?

"Marci, do you remember me?" I asked, keeping my voice low and even, not wanting to startle her.

She still wouldn't acknowledge me. She rocked

slightly as she stared at the floor. I wasn't sure if she needed a medical exam right now. A psychiatrist would probably be better for her. I knew some of the women in the club had spoken to one before. Ram might not have a degree or license but did well with that sort of thing. Would he be able to coax something from her? Even a few words would help. I didn't know if she was in pain, hungry, or what the hell she needed right now.

Why the fuck did they have me walk in here while Marci was alone? The fact a man had come into the apartment probably scared the shit out of her. Then again, if the others were like her, I doubted they'd have been much comfort right now. I wished one of the old ladies had joined me for this. But if they had, and Marci acknowledged me, then I'd have to explain how I knew her. No one knew about Laura or our daughter, Rose, and I intended to keep it that way if at all possible. Some things weren't meant to be shared, and that was a pain that was mine alone to bear.

“The last time I saw you, you were starting high school. Even though we live in a small town, not once have I run into you or your brother, Richard.” Marci flinched when I said her brother's name. My nape prickled and I inched a little closer. Did that asshole Richard have something to do with her being here now? Was he to blame for what happened to Marci? If so, I'd bury the fucker! “You know, I couldn't face you when Laura died. I called Richard...”

She flinched again and whimpered. Her rocking increased. I didn't need a verbal response from her. Her actions alone spoke volumes. I'd have to ask Outlaw to find him for me, which meant I'd have to tell at least one person I knew Marci and how we were connected. I took the risk of

moving even closer to her and went down on one knee in front of her. She froze, her eyes slowly focusing on me. Once she seemed to come back to herself a little, her eyes filled with tears and she flung herself into my arms.

“I’ve got you, Marci. Everything will be fine now.” I rubbed her back and held her tight, letting her soak my cut and tee with her tears. When her cries quieted, I stood and lifted her into my arms. I hesitated to take her to the bedroom she’d been using. I felt like I needed to get her out of the apartment. The more she cried, the more urgent it felt to get her somewhere I could make her feel safe. Clearly, this wasn’t it.

Instead, I found myself carrying her outside and walking to my house. Thank goodness I didn’t live at the back of the compound. I managed to let myself in without setting her down or dropping her, then took her straight to the living room. Easing her down onto the couch, I smoothed her hair back from her face.

“This is my house. You’ll be safe here, all right?”

She gave me a slight nod, then curled into the corner of the couch. I went back to close and lock the door. As I twisted the bolt into place, I stared at it. In all the years I’d lived here, not once had I locked my door. For the first time in ten years, I had someone to protect, and this time I’d do a better job of it.

Marci was no longer the teenager who’d smiled brightly at me and asked a million questions about what it was like to be part of a motorcycle club. She’d grown into a beautiful woman. The thought of her being abused made me grind my teeth. She should have had a loving home, a ton of friends, and been away at college right now. Instead she’d been tossed into hell, most likely by her brother.

When I got back to the living room, she'd closed her eyes but wasn't quite asleep. She peeked at me, letting me know she was aware of her surroundings. It was an improvement over how I'd found her.

"How old are you now, Marci? Twenty-two? Twenty-three?" I asked.

"I don't know. I lost track of time."

I tried to hold in my anger over the situation so I wouldn't scare her. For her to make such a statement meant she'd been with Vega's men for a while. Or possibly someone before them.

"Then can you tell me what happened? Last I heard, your brother was going to take you in until you were old enough to make it on your own." Her lower lip trembled, and she picked at her fingernails. I reached over to place my hand over hers. "No one here will hurt you, Marci. I'm not going to let anything bad happen to you."

Again, I silently added, because I damn sure felt responsible right now. If I'd kept in touch or checked up on her, would this have happened?

"I was sixteen," she murmured. "I came home from school, and Richard had some men over from his work. They were clients he needed to impress."

Jesus. I had a bad feeling I knew exactly where this was going. Only because I'd heard it too many times in all the years the club had been rescuing women and kids who'd been trafficked.

She took a breath and let it out slowly, then licked her lips. "One of them made a comment about young..."

Her cheeks turned scarlet when she stopped, and I knew what the asshole had said. *Young pussy*. I hoped she knew his name because he was on my fucking list too. “It’s okay, Marci. You don’t have to say it.”

“But I do,” she said softly. “Young pussy. He liked teenage girls, and Richard would have done anything to get that man to sign a contract. So he offered me up to him. Except once they discovered I was a virgin the others wanted a turn too, talking about how tight I’d be.”

I swallowed hard and closed my eyes. Putting my fist through a wall or bellowing out my rage wouldn’t do any of us any good right now. Every man present that day was going to die by my hands. It was only a matter of time before I made it happen.

“Did you hear any of their names?” I asked. “Do you remember?”

She gave me the saddest smile ever. “I’ll never forget that day, or those men. Peter Johnson, Wayne Gray, and John Wright. They all apparently had a lot of money. The first one who’d wanted me, Peter Johnson, said he’d offered top dollar for others like me before. Told Richard he could make a lot off me.”

“So all three men hurt you that day,” I said. “And after that?”

She held my gaze, and I saw the pain and anguish in her eyes. “Richard used me to close a few more deals, then I guess he panicked. My grades were slipping at school, and the counselor called him a few times. I’m not sure what he told them when I disappeared, but he sold me to someone.”

“Who? I need a name if you have it,” I said.

“I’m not sure. There were four men there that day, but they mentioned something about a boss. I later learned the boss was called Vega. As for the four men who bought me for him, I don’t know who they were. They took turns using me before they let men pay to...”

I tightened my hold on her hands. Not enough to hurt her, though. I’d failed Laura and Rose, and now I knew I’d failed Marci too. There’d always been something about Richard I hadn’t liked. It never occurred to me he’d do something so awful to his own little sister.

“You knew I was part of this club,” I said. “Why didn’t you tell anyone you knew me? Ram had to have mentioned where he was taking all of you. Yet you remained silent.”

“I was scared,” she said. “Still am. I wasn’t sure if you’d welcome me here or not. The way you disappeared made it clear you didn’t want anything to do with me. If I’d said something, Ram might have left me behind.”

“No, baby girl. He’d have never done that, and I damn sure wouldn’t have turned you away if you came here. I wish you’d come to me the first time Richard let people hurt you. It’s my fault for not reaching out, or making it clear you could rely on me if you got into trouble. I trusted your brother to take care of you, and I shouldn’t have.”

She remained silent for a few minutes, and I didn’t push her. Whatever she needed, I’d give it to her. I didn’t only owe her, but I owed it to the memory of her sister as well. If Laura were looking down on us right now, I knew she’d be so angry with me. I’d been too focused on my own pain that day, and I’d cut ties with Marci. I knew she’d be hurting, and I’d

been a coward and avoided her.

“Why didn’t you ever call me? Richard told me Laura died, and I kept waiting for you to show up.”

I reached up to cup her cheek. “I’m sorry, Marci. Losing Laura and Rose broke something inside me. I can’t say I loved your sister, but I did like her a great deal and I respected her. What we had wasn’t a burning passion, but it worked for us. At the time, I didn’t know how to handle my own grief, especially after holding little Rose’s lifeless body. I should have been there for you, but I ran.”

She remained quiet, as if she were trying to process my words. Or maybe she was battling demons inside her head. I still thought she needed a psychiatrist more than a medical exam. I stood and held my hand out to her.

“Come on. Let’s get you something to eat, then we can discuss any aches or pains you have. It might be awkward for me to examine you, so I can always set up an appointment with a doctor in town.”

“I’d rather you do it,” she said.

“All right.” She placed her hand in mine, and I led her to the kitchen. After pulling out a chair for her, I dug through the cabinets and fridge and told her the options available. I never cooked for more than myself, so the choices were limited.

“Pizza,” she said.

“Instead of the frozen one, I could order something,” I offered. When was the last time she’d had something like that?

“I’m not picky, Stitches.”

I paused at the use of my road name. “You know who I really am, Marci. When it’s just the two of us, you can call me Adam like you always have.”

“I’m glad Ram brought us here,” she said. “All the times I was scared, or worried I wouldn’t live much longer, the one person I wanted to see was you.”

Way to make me feel even worse. Sitting beside her, I didn’t know what the hell to say. I’d already apologized for the shitty way I left her. Nothing I could say would ever be enough, not after all she’d suffered. It wouldn’t matter how many times I said I was sorry or made excuses. The truth was I’d been selfish and had only thought of myself.

“I’ll order something. Pepperoni still your favorite?” I asked.

She nodded and I pulled out my phone, opening the app to create an order. Once I’d paid for two pizzas, some brownies, and a 2-liter of soda, I wasn’t sure what else to do while we waited. Would she want to get her exam out of the way? Hell, I wasn’t sure I was ready for it. I’d seen countless women naked over the years, and some were for medical reasons. This time would be different. I’d known her when she’d only been a teenager, but now Marci was all grown up, and I’d have to be blind not to notice her curves.

“Do you hurt anywhere?” I asked.

“Other than my heart and soul?” she mumbled. “I have some bruising. I’m probably malnourished. No cuts or anything like that.”

“Did they ever have you examined?” I asked.

She paused and looked away for a moment. “A few

times. We'd get tested once a month because having a disease meant being sold to a different clientele. I've always been clean. They hadn't had a chance to use me again since my last one. If it hadn't been negative, I'd have been moved elsewhere."

"What aren't you telling me, Marci?" I asked. She refused to meet my gaze. I lightly brushed her hand with my fingers, drawing attention back to me. "Talk to me. I can't help you if I don't know all the important parts."

"One of the men who paid for me asked to have me all to himself. But it wasn't just for sex." A tear slid down her cheek. "He wanted a breeder, and I was only eighteen. He thought me being so young would mean a better shot at a healthy baby."

My heart hammered in my chest. Jesus. Was she telling me there was a kid out there somewhere? A baby who was half Marci? If that was the case, I'd do whatever I could to get the child back. No way I'd let that kind of monster have them. Didn't matter if they were a boy or a girl. I'd go to hell and back to get Marci's baby back to her. Although, if she'd been eighteen, the kid had to be four or five now, depending on when they were born.

"I miscarried," she said. "He wanted to try again, and Vega let him, but the doctor recommended waiting. Four months after I lost the first baby, the man who'd paid Vega decided to try again. I belonged to him for three months before I got pregnant. By the time the babies were born, I was nineteen."

"Babies? Plural?" I asked.

"Triplets." She gave me a sad smile. "One was

stillborn. A little boy. The two girls made it, but they were tiny and weak. The man got angry with Vega and demanded a partial refund. I never even got to hold them.”

“Marci, do you know the man’s name?” I asked. “I can’t promise anything, but I’ll do my best to find those girls for you.”

I hated to give her false hope. There was a chance the kids hadn’t made it, or that the man had gotten rid of them. Even though he’d paid to breed her like a damn cow or horse, if he’d felt the babies were inferior he might have sold them or tossed them into the trash. Nothing surprised me anymore. Not when it came to men like that. I’d seen too much of the ugliness in the world.

“Walter Bronson,” she said. “I don’t know where he lived or anything. At the time, he was in his sixties. Boasted all the time about being a millionaire. I know he had a house in Florida, but he made it sound like a vacation home.”

“I need to call someone, and I’ll be right back. Do you need anything right now?”

“Bathroom,” she said.

“You can use the one in my bedroom if you want. The master is through there,” I said, pointing to a door along the back of the kitchen. “Go down the short hall and straight through the door ahead of you. Or the guest bath is off the living room.”

She stood and made her way to my room, and I stepped outside to call Outlaw. I knew he wasn’t hacking anymore. It would have been quicker to bypass him and go to Wire. However, I didn’t want him to feel like we didn’t still rely on

him. At the very least I wanted to give him a heads-up.

Outlaw picked up on the fourth ring. “Hello.”

“I need someone tracked down, and I know you don’t do that sort of thing anymore. Didn’t feel right calling Wire or the others before talking to you first.”

He snorted. “You aren’t going to hurt my feelings. Go ahead and call Wire and Lavender, or even Surge.”

“Thanks, Outlaw.”

I hung up and started to call Wire. Then I realized he and his wife tended to let things slip and decided to speak with Surge instead. Maybe he could keep quiet about my past.

When Surge answered, I could hear his family in the background. “I hope this is quick.”

“Interesting way of answering the phone,” I said.

“Fuck you. Who is this and what do you need?”

“It’s Stitches with the Devil’s Fury. I need someone tracked down, and it’s personal so if you keep quiet about what I’m going to tell you, that would be awesome.”

“Hit me with it and then I’ll decide.”

Asshole. “The short version is there’s a woman in my house who was trafficked. When she was nineteen, someone bred her and took her two girls. Man was in his sixties, had a house in Florida that she thinks was a vacation home, and his name is Walter Bronson. I believe Marci is now twenty-three, so the girls would be four now, or turning four. She didn’t mention what time of year they were born.”

“Fuck,” he muttered. “And the longer version?”

“I used to date her sister. In fact, Laura and I were going to have a daughter. Rose. Except something went wrong during delivery. Rose was stillborn, and Laura hemorrhaged. I lost them both, and then I was a dick and walked away from Laura’s little sister. The shithead brother decided to sell her, but not before he used her to further his career. Did you hear about the man Ram just took out? Vega? Marci ended up with his men.”

“That’s...” Surge sighed. “Anything else I need to look for?”

“Yeah, I want the locations of the men who turned her into a whore when she was still a virgin.” I gave him the three names, and hoped like hell he could find them. “And dig up whatever you can on Richard Paxton.”

“I’ll send updates to you via text, and I’ll call when I have everything together. Why exactly am I keeping this from your club, and I’m assuming mine as well?”

“No one knew about Laura and Rose. It’s private, and I’d prefer to keep it that way for as long as possible. Not to mention, I’d rather focus on Marci right now than my past with her sister.”

“Fair enough.” He hung up without another word. The man might be a dick at times, but I knew he was brilliant with a computer. A Prospect rode up in a club truck and got out with my pizza order, handing it over.

“Thanks. Can you let Ram know that Marci is here with me?” I asked. “She’s one of the women he brought in.”

His eyebrows arched. He gave me a quick nod and hurried back to the truck. I wondered how long before Ram or

Badger would be calling and demanding to know what the hell was going on. Hopefully, I'd have something I could tell them by then, without divulging how Marci and I knew each other.

Chapter Two

Marci

It was really him. How many times had I thought about Stitches over the years? Losing Laura had been awful, but I'd also lost the only man I'd ever been able to rely on. I'd never understood why he'd left so abruptly. Now I did, at least a little. While my heart had broken for the sister I'd lost, he'd also had to say goodbye to his daughter — and he'd been there when they both died. It must have hit him hard. Hearing about my sister's passing and watching her die were two very different things.

No matter what I'd been through, I didn't blame him for my misfortune. My brother should have protected me, cared for me, and not used me to further his career. I'd always known my family wasn't the same as everyone else's. Most of the kids I'd gone to school with had at least one parent in their home, and you could tell they were loved. Even if they didn't have the newest phone or computer, they had someone who cared and was always there for them.

For me, that had been Laura and Stitches. Until the day I'd lost them both. Richard didn't even pretend he wanted me around. From the first day I'd moved in with him, he'd made sure I knew what an inconvenience it was for him. Laura's passing didn't bother him. It might as well have been any other day of the week. *My* world fell apart when she died.

I stared at my reflection in the bathroom mirror. It had been so long since I'd bothered to check my appearance. There

were shadows under my eyes, my cheeks had thinned, and my hair appeared stringy and flat. It didn't matter whether I'd washed it already or not. The woman peering back at me looked like a horror movie extra. In fact, I could probably play a zombie right now and not need any makeup. Wincing, I splashed some water on my face, wishing I could wash away the past seven years.

What did Stitches see when he looked at me now? I'd always been like a pesky kid sister to him, or maybe even a daughter, since he'd been older than Laura. He'd helped with my homework rather often and made sure we didn't go hungry. Truth be told, I'd had a bit of a crush on him when I was thirteen. He'd been so amazing, and I'd worried I'd never find another man like him when I was old enough to start a family of my own.

My dreams were long gone and, it seemed, so were Stitches'. I hadn't noticed the touch of a woman in this house, and the fact he hadn't brought up anyone made me think he lived alone. Had he not given anyone a chance since Laura died? How much had her death broken him? At thirteen, I'd wondered what it would be like to date when I was older. I'd never had the chance to find out.

I hadn't been a child for a while now. Even before I'd legally been an adult, I'd had to grow up fast, thanks to the horror Richard put me through before selling me off like unwanted baggage. Wherever my brother might be right now, I hoped when he died, he'd go straight to hell and burn forever. Assuming there even was such a place. I'd never been overly religious, and after my experiences, I hadn't seen a reason to pray to a God who'd not seen fit to save me until now. If there really was a God, why did he let such awful things happen to

us? No, better to believe there wasn't one. I'd had enough people fail me in my life without adding a deity to it.

Why had Stitches brought me here? I'd agreed to stay in one of the apartments. It wasn't like I expected him to take care of me after all this time. I didn't hold a grudge or anything, but I also didn't want to rely on him only to have him disappear once more. Then again, this was his home. If anyone ran off, it would have to be me. Or he could ask me to leave. The man I'd known before wouldn't have done something like that. It seemed reasonable to assume if I'd changed in ten years, then he had as well. The Stitches I'd known before might not be the same as the man with me today.

He knocked on the door. "You all right in there, Marci?"

"Sorry. Got caught up in my thoughts," I said, turning to open the door. My gaze clashed with his before flicking over his appearance. I wondered when he'd started shaving his head. I could tell from the fuzz growing in that he'd done it on purpose, and it hadn't fallen out over the years. When he'd dated Laura, he'd had thick hair that sometimes fell over his brow. She'd always pushed it away from his face and teased him about being a sheepdog.

"Food is here. Let's eat, and then we can talk about what happens next," he said.

"I assumed you'd check over my bruises and send me back to the apartment. It's rather nice. Although, I'm not much of a cook. I'm a bit worried I'll accidentally burn the place down." I still didn't know why he hadn't just completed the exam at the apartment. It was what he'd done for the others.

The fact we'd once known each other shouldn't have made a difference.

“Like I said, eat first, then talk. Come on.” He held out his hand and I reluctantly took it. The thought of needing him, only to be left behind once more, terrified me. The more I leaned on him now, the harder it would be to say goodbye again.

He led me to the kitchen, and I reclaimed the chair I'd taken before. Stitches took down plates, pulled off a handful of paper towels, and then poured a glass of soda for me. I noticed he'd grabbed a cold beer from the fridge, and it made me wonder if alcohol would help ease the buzzing in my head. Probably not. I'd never had any, but Vega's men had drugged me a few times. I hadn't liked the aftereffects.

He put two slices of pepperoni on my plate, and I noticed my hand shook as I picked up the first one. My mouth watered and the first bite nearly made me moan. It was so good. I hadn't had a pizza like this in forever. It brought a mix of good and bad memories with it.

“Is your girlfriend going to come home and toss me out?” I asked, deciding to see if I was right about him being single.

“Not seeing anyone,” he said. “You don't have to worry about that. Your sister is the last girlfriend I had.”

“I find it hard to believe you've been single all this time,” I said.

He cleared his throat and shifted, seeming awkward for a moment. “I don't need to seriously date someone in order to have sex. No, I'm not a monk. The women always consent,

and they know up front I'm not looking for more."

I hadn't ever thought otherwise. While people changed over the years, for Stitches to become someone entirely different, it would have probably taken more than my sister and his daughter dying. There was always one line I didn't think he'd ever cross — hurting a woman or child. Even back then, he'd made it clear we'd always be safe with him. I'd believed it then, and I still did.

"She wouldn't have wanted you to be alone forever," I said. "I don't think Rose would have either."

"Probably not." He took a swallow of his beer and when he sat the can down, he turned it a few times, lost in thought. "Would you want to visit their graves with me?"

I stared at him. Out of all the things I'd thought he might say, that hadn't been it. I knew he'd paid for them to be buried, and where they were. I'd gone once or twice the first year they'd been gone. After that, Richard threw a fit whenever I brought it up.

"You still go see them?" I asked.

"Yeah. Hard to get away from the club sometimes, but I manage. We can grab some flowers to take."

"How would we get there?" I asked. "You didn't even let me ride your motorcycle to come to the house."

"You weren't in any shape to do something like that. It's not because I didn't want you on my bike, all right? It would probably be better to take a club truck. I can tell them I'm taking you shopping."

"Won't they find it odd when we come back without

bags? Not to mention, why would you volunteer to take me?" I asked.

He took a bite of pizza and glowered at me. I didn't know what I'd said to irritate him. He was every bit as difficult to read now as he'd been ten years ago. Even though I had a lot more practice now. When I'd been thirteen, I'd taken everyone at face value. I'd learned how to look behind the masks most people wore.

Before he said anything to me, he pulled out his phone and called someone. The way he watched me made me feel a little anxious. The moment I heard the name of who he'd called, I wanted to run away. Why the hell had he called his club President?

"Badger, it's Stitches. I have one of the women with me, the ones Ram brought in. When I went to give Marci her checkup, she sort of retreated into herself. She's fine now, but I want to keep an eye on her. Might take her out for a drive if she's up for it, so I was going to grab a club truck."

I couldn't hear the other end of the conversation, but when Stitches hung up without another word, I wondered what the hell was going on, and what his President was thinking right now. Stitches went back to eating like nothing had just happened. I had a feeling it was a huge deal he'd let the man know I was here.

"Do you bring people to your house often?" I asked.

"Never. Why?"

"You don't think he's going to find this odd? I think I would if I were in his shoes."

He shrugged and kept eating and drinking his beer. All

right. If he wasn't concerned, then I wouldn't be either. As I looked around his kitchen, I wondered if he would have ever brought Laura and Rose here. If he had, would they have been happy? The women we'd met when we first arrived didn't seem to mind being here. I had to admit, I liked being behind a fence. It made me feel safer.

I finished the two slices he'd given me and slowly reached for a third. There'd been a time I would have gobbled up half the pizza without putting any thought into it. I'd learned every action resulted in a consequence. It would take a while before I didn't feel that way anymore. I knew with a certainty Stitches would never hurt me. Didn't stop me from measuring every move I made or word I said.

"I know the club stocked the kitchen at the apartment, and they've bought you some clothes and shoes. Ram made sure you didn't arrive empty-handed. So, what do you need or want?" he asked.

"You're seriously taking me shopping?"

"Why not?" He shoved his empty plate aside. "It wouldn't be the first time I took you somewhere or bought you things. You didn't have an issue with it back then."

If he didn't see the difference, I wasn't going to point it out. I had a feeling arguing with him was every bit as pointless as it had been back then too. Laura had seldom won an argument with him. Of course, they typically fought over financial issues — ours, not his. Laura hadn't liked accepting what she thought of as handouts, and Stitches had been determined we wouldn't suffer without food, electricity, or in my case, new clothes for school. He'd always been kind to us, and even though there was an emptiness to his eyes if you

looked hard enough, I could see the gentleness that had attracted Laura to him.

“Did you want any of the things from the apartment before the exam? You’re welcome to shower and change here, if that’s something you want to do before we leave,” he said.

“Wouldn’t it make more sense for me to just go back there and do those things? Or for us to have stayed there to begin with?”

He leaned back in his seat. “Maybe. I couldn’t stand seeing you like that. It felt right to bring you here. Like...”

I waited, wanting him to finish his sentence. When he didn’t, I decided to move on. Whatever was going on in his head, he clearly wasn’t ready to share it just yet. Or maybe not ever. He hadn’t been prepared to see me again. It had to be a shock, not to mention *how* we’d met again.

“Let’s get this over with. Then you walk me back to the apartment and I’ll change while you get the truck.” I stood and pulled the dress over my head. He sucked in an audible breath, and the look on his face nearly made me want to run. Except I knew the anger wasn’t directed at me. No, he’d noticed all the marks on my body, including the scars.

Stitches stood and came closer, lightly touching the bruises and running his fingers along the marks from knives and ropes. When he ran his hand down my spine, I shivered. Looking down at my body, I saw the way my ribs protruded, and my hipbones stuck out more than they should.

“When I find them, they will pay,” he muttered.

Find them? He circled me like a predator. Did he mean he was seriously going to track down anyone who’d hurt me?

Was he planning to kill them? I wasn't sure how I felt about it. On one hand, I didn't see them as human. They were monsters, and nothing more. On the other... what if he got caught and went to jail? I didn't think my conscience could handle it. I didn't want him to suffer because he'd tried to get revenge on my behalf.

“With the exception of the bruises, none of these are recent wounds. There's no reason for you to go after the men who hurt me.”

Stitches pressed his lips together. The scowl on his face might have scared someone else, someone who didn't know how kind and gentle he could be. I couldn't think of a single thing that would ever make me afraid of him.

“Do you have any idea what I felt the first time I saw you again? The fury that filled me? I became so enraged I wanted to rip something apart. I've always despised men who hurt those who are weaker than them, but knowing your own brother tried to destroy you, passed you along as a toy for others, made me want to tear his limbs from his body.” He sighed and closed his eyes a moment before holding my gaze again. “In some respects, I'm no less monstrous than those men. I could kill them without feeling one bit of remorse, nor would I hesitate for even a moment. What sort of person does that make me?”

I wondered if his question might be rhetorical. He couldn't honestly feel he was no different from the men who'd hurt me, could he? The tension in his body, the tightness of his jaw, and the darkness in his eyes, all told me that yes, he did see himself as something monstrous to be feared.

“Adam, you've always been the only man I could rely

on, the only one I could trust, and who made me feel safe. No matter how many years have passed, none of that has changed. Except possibly the first part. As much as I want to lean on you, to let you hold me and tell me everything is fine, a part of me worries that you'll vanish from my life again. I'm not sure I'd survive losing you this time."

The startled expression he shot my way told me I'd said far more than I should have. Perhaps the crush I'd once had on him wasn't gone after all. Had I just given away my true feelings and let him see exactly what he meant to me? If any other man had touched me, even a casual brush of his hand against me, I would have panicked and freaked out. Or I would have retreated into my mind and possibly not come back to myself for several days.

When it happened earlier, I hadn't known it was Stitches coming into the apartment. His voice eventually penetrated the darkness swirling in my mind, and he'd brought me back. No one else could have done such a thing.

"I'm sorry," I said, looking away. "I shouldn't have..."

He gently touched my chin and turned my face toward his. "You have nothing to apologize for. I'll prove myself worthy of your trust again. No matter how long it takes."

Chapter Three

Stitches

I'd convinced Marci to stay for the night. I hadn't slept much, trying to listen in case she had a nightmare or needed me. Other than a few whimpers here and there, she'd appeared to sleep well. I did worry about her lack of emotion. There were times I saw something in her eyes, or she'd reveal something, and yet it also felt like there was a disconnect of sorts. Which was why I'd invited Ram over for breakfast. Too bad he'd declined.

I'd already brewed and drunk an entire pot of coffee this morning and had another percolating. When Marci woke up, she'd either be confused or angry. Assuming she reacted at all. First thing this morning, I'd asked a Prospect to bring over her things from the apartment. I knew I should have asked if she wanted to remain here with me, but if I gave her the chance to distance herself, she'd take it.

At thirteen, there had been times she'd looked a little bit like Laura, or what I'd imagined my girlfriend to look like at that age. The grown-up version of Marci didn't even look related to her siblings. I'd wanted to take her to see Laura and Rose yesterday but had called it off at the last minute. I didn't think Marci was ready. Deciding things for her wasn't necessarily a good thing. She wasn't a child anymore, and while I realized that, I also knew some part of her was broken. It made me want to shoulder as much as I could to relieve some of the weight pressing down on her.

My phone rang and I quickly answered when I saw it was Surge. “What do you have?”

He could have given me shit for not greeting him when I answered, but he rolled with it. “A lot. Where do you want me to start?”

“The brother. Richard. Tell me what you found.”

“Richard Paxton has been missing for about three years now. I use the term missing rather loosely. Even though I can’t find proof, I believe he’s lying in a shallow grave somewhere. He wasn’t hanging with the best crowd of people. A few of his deals went south, and it would have cost his boss enough to earn him an execution.”

In other words, he hadn’t been working at a legit job, but for one of the thugs around town. That’s if he’d even remained here all these years. It was possible he’d moved on, especially after he got rid of Marci.

“The three men I mentioned?” I asked.

“I’ll send you their info. One is close to you. The other two are in other states. In fact, one is way across the country in California. You’re either going to need a long reach for him or get help from another club.”

We’d spoken to the Mayhem Riders a few times, and I knew their President, Destroyer, would be up for this type of job. Depending on how things went, I’d reach out to him, or ask Badger to do it. The others I wanted to torture with my own two hands.

“What about Bronson?” I asked.

“Dead. He’s only been dead about two months. Heart

attack. As for the girls, there's no record he ever had children. I'm going to keep digging and see what I can find. If they're out there somewhere, I'll find them. After two more days, if I don't have any leads, then I'll call the others for help. Between me, Wire, Lavender, Wizard, and Shade, we'll locate those kids no matter what it takes."

"I appreciate it, Surge. Please keep me posted. I want to give Marci some good news."

I ended the call and poured another cup of coffee. At this rate, I'd be walking on the ceiling in another hour. Then again, I felt so exhausted I might doze off regardless of how much caffeine I sucked down. Even though I wanted to check for the information Surge said he'd send, I held back. If I looked at it now, I'd want to go after those men. Marci needed me here. No amount of revenge would ever give her back what she'd lost. I needed to help her find a way to heal. Something told me finding her girls would go a long way toward meeting that goal.

Knowing Bronson had died might give her a little comfort, except I knew she'd ask about her daughters. Until I knew their whereabouts, I needed to keep silent. Discovering Bronson had never claimed them as his own would only distress her. They could honestly be anywhere by now. I hoped he'd given them to a kind family, but I didn't think the sort of man who'd purchased a young woman for breeding would be the type to care what happened to children he didn't even want.

Personally, I wished the bastard was still alive. Same for Richard. I'd wanted to make them suffer. I felt cheated. Sure, I'd still get vengeance on the other three. It didn't ease

the rage burning inside me, not even a little. I wanted to watch them bleed, hear them beg, and then I wanted to make them burn. The last thing I'd hear would be their screams of agony. I couldn't think of a more fitting end to men who'd done such unspeakable things.

Footsteps in the hall alerted me to Marci's presence. She staggered into the kitchen and collapsed onto a chair. Despite the fact she'd slept more than eight hours, she still appeared completely exhausted. The dark circles under her eyes looked worse today than they had yesterday. What haunted her at night? What demons lurked in her dreams? She'd told me some of what she'd suffered. I knew there had to be more. The scars on her body said as much.

“Are you hungry?” I asked. “Want some juice?”

“I think I need coffee,” she mumbled.

Another way in which she differed from Laura. Laura had never touched the stuff, always preferring tea or soda. I got up and made Marci a cup of coffee, setting it down in front of her. She hadn't said anything about needing milk or sugar and surprised me even further when she picked up the cup and sucked down half of it. It looked like she drank it black, just like me.

“Are you keeping me here?” she asked.

“Noticed your things, huh? Yes, I am. I'm not sure being alone is the right thing for you right now. You may have had a roommate, but I'm betting she's also a bit broken. Not sure the two of you will be enough to hold yourselves together. Besides, how else am I supposed to redeem myself in your eyes? It won't be easy to do as it is, but if we remain in separate homes, it becomes even harder.”

Her lips twitched like she might smile. “In other words, you’re keeping an eye on me for fear I might do something stupid like off myself?”

Jesus fucking Christ. The thought hadn’t even occurred to me, but since she’d voiced those words, I sure the hell was concerned about it *now*.

“Is that something you’ve wanted to do?” I asked, trying to keep my voice calm.

She shrugged a shoulder. “I’d imagine all of us have considered it at one point or another. At first, there’s always the hope that things aren’t as bad as you fear. Or they delude themselves into thinking someone will come save them. Since my only family sold me, I didn’t have such delusions.”

She spoke of it so casually, as if she weren’t talking about anything more important than the weather. Exactly how much had she desensitized herself in order to survive? When had it happened? After Richard betrayed her? Or had losing her children been the final thing to make her crack?

“But to answer your question, yes, I did think about it quite a few times. I never had the guts to go through with it. Besides, the way things were going, I’d have eventually died anyway.”

I fisted my hand on my thigh, trying to control myself. I wanted to shake her, scream in her face that those sorts of thoughts weren’t okay. How did she not see a problem with any of this? Why didn’t she want to fight?

I no longer had to ask how she’d endured it all. She’d clearly separated everything in her mind. The Marci who suffered at the hands of those men was locked away

somewhere inside her. I knew she needed to confront those buried emotions and trauma, and yet, I also worried it might be too much for her. Clearly, she'd found a way to protect herself. If I chipped away at the wall she'd built, it could crumble to dust and leave her unresponsive for the rest of her life.

“Do you still want to end it all?” I asked.

“I don't know. Sometimes. Maybe.” She finished her coffee and pushed the cup aside. “I have no idea where I fit into the world anymore, Adam. First, I was a broken teenager who'd lost the only people who cared about her. Then I became a toy for my brother's associates. And finally, the men he sold me to made me into a whore. Where does that leave me now?”

“You have a chance to start over, Marci. You could get your GED, go to college, try some different jobs to see what interests you. The possibilities are endless.”

“Are they? Really?” She lifted her gaze to mine. “Because I don't think they are. What skills do I have? The ability to suck off a man while taking it from behind? And yes, I've done that, among other things.”

I wanted to beg her to stop, not to tell me anything else. But that wouldn't be fair. She'd suffered through everything on her own. If she wanted to talk about it, then I'd let her. Of course, I had a feeling she was only trying to shock me right now.

She whipped her nightgown over her head, baring her body to me. She waved a hand at her torso, and fuck if I didn't feel like a sick bastard for noticing how perfect her breasts were. “I can't exactly be a stripper either. What men would pay me to strip on stage when I have so many scars?”

“You’re beautiful,” I said softly. “Those are your war wounds. Badges of courage. No matter what those men did to you, you survived, Marci. I’m sure not everyone can say the same. There would have been others before you. Ram said all of you were in cages. The fact you were occupying one means it had been empty. What do you think happened to the girl who used it before you?”

She slumped in her chair, still not bothering to cover up. Then again, her nudity probably didn’t bother her much anymore. Whatever bashfulness she’d initially felt had long been burned out of her.

“Vega didn’t just sell girls, Marci. He also enjoyed torturing and killing them.”

“I guess I never thought of it that way. Can I really consider myself lucky, though? Maybe those girls went fast instead of being held captive for years. I don’t even know how many dicks I’ve had inside me. Fifty? One hundred? There were days a dozen men paid to use me. I’ve probably been fucked by thousands of men, Adam.”

I noticed she’d stopped being shy about her words. Yesterday, she hadn’t been able to say *pussy* without her cheeks flushing. Either she’d gotten comfortable around me again, or she no longer cared what she said or did. I didn’t particularly like that second option.

“That wasn’t fucking,” I said. “It was rape. Say it, Marci. You were raped, repeatedly, for years. If there was a way to track down every man who’s ever touched you, I’d do it.”

She looked around the room, not meeting my gaze. I wanted to stand up, get her nightgown off the floor, and make

her get dressed again. But that would be the wrong move. Whether Marci realized it or not, this was her way of testing me. How many men had seen her naked body and not touched her? I doubted there were any. I wouldn't be like them.

“It's just a word, Adam. And no matter how ugly it is, it doesn't even touch on the horror of what I went through. I know it, but I'm not sure I feel it anymore. Or anything, for that matter. Except fear. That I have plenty of.”

“Are you scared right now?” I asked.

“No.” She focused on me again. “By now, any other man would have propositioned me, or taken what he wanted. I can't even tell if you've noticed I'm sitting here naked.”

“I noticed. I'm a man, after all. Doesn't mean I can't control myself, Marci. That's the difference between guys like me and the ones you've known. Those bastards are bullies who take what they want and thrive on hurting women and kids. I'll never be like that.”

“I know,” she whispered. “You were always my hero. It's not fair to ask you to be one again.”

“You're not asking,” I said. “I'm offering. I'll be whatever you need me to be. All you have to do is tell me. I can't read your mind. Communicate with me, Marci. Let me help you.”

“You really want to help me?” she asked, standing up. “Then show me it doesn't have to hurt when a man touches me.”

What the absolute fuck? I hadn't seen that one coming. Was she serious right now? I saw the way her hands trembled, and before she could mask it, I also noticed the pleading look

in her eyes. Then an aloof mask slid over her face, hiding all her emotions from me.

“If I did that, it wouldn’t make me any different from the men who paid to use you. You should give that honor to someone you’re dating. I might only do casual hookups now, Marci, but you know I wasn’t always like that. Don’t settle for less than you deserve, all right?”

She shifted from one foot to another, still not getting dressed. I refused to lower my gaze from her face, especially since I’d gotten a brief glimpse of the fact she hadn’t put on panties. The woman was trying to kill me.

“Then date me, Adam. I’ve never had a boyfriend. Never been out to dinner with a guy who liked me. Show me what I’ve missed, what I’m supposed to look forward to. Give me a reason to keep waking up every day.” She let out a soft breath. “Just don’t make me beg.”

I stood and went to her, pulling her into my arms. I felt her hands clutch at my cut, then listened as she quietly cried. She wanted a boyfriend? No, she wanted *me* as her boyfriend? Could I do it? Should I?

“Go shower and put on something pretty,” I said. “I’ll take you out on our first date. We’ll get breakfast and take a walk in the park.”

She sniffled and pulled back so she could look up at me. “Really?”

I nodded. If this was what she wanted, what she *needed*, then I’d give it to her. I only hoped it wouldn’t come back to bite me in the ass.

Chapter Four

Marci

My very first date, assuming it was a real one. It felt a bit surreal. Not long ago I'd thought I'd be dead within another year or two. Now I found myself having breakfast at a café in town with Stitches.

Being back in the area where I'd grown up felt bittersweet. Up until my sister died, I'd made a lot of happy memories here. Thankfully the café wasn't a place I'd ever gone with Richard. If it had been, I didn't think I would have been able to enjoy myself. No matter how long I remained in Blackwood Falls, I wasn't sure I would ever completely erase the memories associated with my brother.

We'd already placed our order, and I now gazed out the window. The sun shone brightly and had I been anyone else this would have been a happy day. I wasn't sure if I could ever have a normal life again. I'd seen firsthand the ugliness in the world and experienced far too much pain. Ever since Ram rescued us, I'd wondered if there was really a place in the world for people like me. It didn't matter how many times someone said we were safe and everything would be fine; some part of me couldn't believe them.

It wasn't like I was qualified for any sort of employment, which meant I wouldn't be able to support myself. The Devil's Fury might be helping us now, but how long could we stay with them? Being told we could stay however long we needed, and actually doing it, were two

different things. For all I knew, we'd overstay our welcome and be out on our asses. If I could believe everything Stitches had told me, then I wouldn't have to worry because he'd take care of me. What would the others do? Ram had taken in Talia and Riley. Stitches seemed intent on helping me. The others didn't have anyone.

As much as I wanted to ask about the long-term goals for those of us who had belonged to Vega, I was too scared to voice my questions. I wasn't nearly as brave as I wanted to be. Even without looking at him, I could feel Stitches' gaze on me. Was he trying to find the Marci he'd once known? Did he hope to catch a glimpse of my sister in my features?

"If you keep staring at me like that, I'm going to become concerned and think I have something smeared on my face." I looked away from the window to study him. He'd admitted he felt guilty over what happened to me. Even now I could see the tension in the lines of his face and the darkness in his eyes.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to make you feel self-conscious. If it's any consolation, you've turned into a beautiful woman. I keep trying to reconcile this new version of you with the teenager I once knew."

"Stop trying. Whoever I was back then has nothing to do with who I am now. It didn't take long for them to beat me into submission. My brother killed the old Marci. I'm not sure there's any part of her left inside me."

I looked away unable to hold his gaze for another moment. While I'd told him I didn't blame him for anything that happened to me, and I'd even believed it myself, I now had to wonder if I hadn't been completely honest with either

of us. There was some part of me that wanted to pick at him and make him suffer. Until now I had always believed I only resented my brother. What if that wasn't true?

If I lashed out at Stitches, would he abandon me? Would he become tired of this darker, broken version of myself? It wasn't that I'd survived this long because I never gave up, but more because fate seemed to have something else in mind for me. I felt so incredibly tired. Mental, emotional, and physical exhaustion pulled me down. There had been so many times when I'd closed my eyes at night and hoped I wouldn't open them in the morning.

"Whatever you're thinking right now, you should probably stop," he said. "I can practically see the dark thoughts swirling in your mind."

"It's been a long time since my mind was filled with anything else. Just because you want me to think happy thoughts doesn't mean it will happen. I can't dismiss the past seven years and pretend I'm the same person I was before." I felt a little bit like an ungrateful brat at the moment, and perhaps a bit psychotic. My thoughts seemed to swing wildly from one direction to another. I might be physically free from the cage, but mentally I was still a captive.

Our food arrived and I stared at the plate. It had been sweet of him to bring me here and offer to go on a date. So why was I acting like such a bitch today? I couldn't process my feelings right now. Numbness. Anger. Resentment. And even a small amount of hope. They all swirled together inside of me, making me feel as if I'd been dropped into a cup, shaken, then dumped back out again.

I took a breath and let it out slowly. Forcing myself to

meet his gaze I gave him a small smile. “I’m sorry. I don’t know why I’m lashing out. Thank you for bringing me here.”

Stitches leaned back in his seat, took a sip of his coffee, and remained quiet for several moments. When he spoke again, his insightfulness unnerved me.

“I think I actually prefer this version of you. I’ve wondered how you were suppressing all of the pain you must have felt, and possibly still feel. So if it will make you feel any better, you’re welcome to scream at me, throw things, even hit me. Whatever you wanna toss my way, I promise I can handle it. What I think or feel isn’t important right now.”

He probably thought his words would be comforting and set me at ease. Instead, they only made me feel guilty. It wasn’t right to hurt the only person who wanted to help me. The club had given us a place to stay, made sure we had some basics, but it wasn’t like they came by to check on us. Being mean to Stitches made me feel a little like an abused dog who’d bitten the hand of the person trying to save it. Except I was a human and not an animal. There was no excuse for my behavior.

“It’s not too late to let me go back to the apartment. You can pretend you don’t know who I am. There’s no reason for you to turn your life upside down.”

He closed his eyes, let out a deep sigh, then opened them again. “I’m already in too deep, Marci. Even if you didn’t stay in the house with me, I still wouldn’t be able to walk away. I’m going to do whatever it takes to lay your demons to rest and give you a fresh start. Not because I feel like I owe it to you or your sister, but because it’s the right thing to do. You can push me away as much as you want. I’m

not going anywhere.”

I felt tears prick my eyes and I focused on my food. I’d broken down when he held me. Being in his arms gave me a safety and comfort I’d never had. A different sort from what I’d experienced when I was younger. If I remained with Stitches, there were two possible outcomes. I’d either be completely broken and shattered beyond repair, or I’d find the courage to take a leap of faith. Either way, the more time I spent with him the more likely I’d end up giving him my heart. Whether or not I survived loving him would be entirely up to Stitches.

“I need you to promise me something. If there comes a time when you don’t want me to stay with you, you have to let me know. I wasn’t lying when I said Laura would want you to be happy. It’s okay to fall in love. Don’t let me be the reason you hold back.”

Stitches reached across the table and placed his hand over mine. “That’s pretty good advice. You should try telling yourself the same thing. It’s all right for you to be happy, to want a family. Don’t let those bastards kill every dream you ever had; otherwise, they’ll win.”

I knew he was right even if I didn’t want to admit it. Letting myself feel hopeless wasn’t going to get me anywhere. I needed to learn how to stop those dark thoughts when they started. It wouldn’t be a change I could make overnight. Settling into a new life would be hard, but I’d always heard things worth having never came easy. I hadn’t really understood that phrase until now.

“Think about what you want your life to look like, Marci. The only person who can achieve your goals is you.

Even if I cleared a path for you, you would still be the one who had to walk to your destination. You don't need a big goal to start. Try something small."

Something small. I wasn't entirely certain what he meant. The last time I set a goal I'd been in high school. I could no longer think in terms of getting a perfect score on a test or figuring out what college to attend. As an adult I would need a job, a place to live, and transportation. Those were probably things he considered to be big goals.

"I don't know what a small goal would be." I hated to admit such a thing. It made me feel stupid.

"Well, I can't set your goals for you, but it doesn't mean I can't help you figure things out. When we get home, we can start making a few lists. Think of everything you want to do or obtain, and then we can break them down. Once you have an idea of the things you want, then you can take your time working on achieving each one. And if you stumble or fall, I'll be right here to catch you."

I bit my lip wanting to laugh for the first time in forever. "I appreciate it even if that last line did sound like it came from a country song."

He pointed a finger at me and smiled. "And there she is, the hidden inner Marci. I knew she'd make an appearance sooner or later. How does it feel?"

His words made me pause. Stitches was right in a sense. It wasn't so much that my *inner Marci* had come out, but more that my humanity had broken through the surface. I'd been hollow for so long. A broken toy to be used and abused by men. Until just now. I didn't think it was a feeling I could hold on to, at least not yet. So maybe that should be my first

main goal... becoming human again.

“It seems something just clicked into place inside your brain,” he said. “Good. Maybe now you’ll stand up and fight.”

We finished our meal and Stitches paid the bill. He’d mentioned a walk in the park. Being outside was probably good for me. I hesitated for only a moment before reaching out and taking his hand. The roughness of his palm and the warmth of his fingers made me feel a little less alone.

He led me down the sidewalk and into the park at the center of town. Neither of us said anything. With Stitches, I didn’t feel like I needed to fill the silence with meaningless words. We started down a path flanked by all sorts of plants and flowers. Birds sang from nearby trees. I let the tranquility of the moment wash over me.

I saw someone walking toward us and didn’t think much of it until she called out my name. I stopped and tried to figure out who she was.

“You’re Marci Paxton, right?”

I gave her a slight nod, still not having any idea who she was. Had we gone to school together? She did appear to be around my age.

“Weren’t you in a mental hospital or something? I heard that’s why you left school so abruptly. Is it safe for you to be wandering around like this?”

So she’d been one of *those* girls. The stuck-up snobby ones who felt like they were better than everyone else. All too often they’d torn down other people in order to feel more powerful. In high school, I’d found girls like her to be intimidating. Then my brother had destroyed my life, and none

of it had mattered anymore.

“Exactly who the fuck are you?” Stitches asked.

“I’m Bonnie Wetherby. Marci and I went to school together. How do the two of you know each other?”

Stitches assessed her and I felt his hand tighten on mine. He said he wanted to destroy the men who’d hurt me. He wouldn’t hit a woman, would he? I had never once been afraid of him, but something told me Bonnie should be.

“What business is it of yours?” he asked. “It doesn’t seem as if the two of you were friends, unless you’re this horrible to everyone you know. Then again, maybe you’re just a bitch all the time.”

Wow. I didn’t think anyone had ever spoken to Bonnie, or the other girls like her, in that tone before. From what I remembered they’d been revered in high school.

“It figures someone crazy like her would end up with a dirty biker like you. Aren’t you old enough to be her father? What kind of sick person are you?”

Stitches chuckled even though it lacked humor. No, it was the type of laugh a man gave right before he flattened someone for being an ass. Logically I knew we should move on and get away from Bonnie, but there was a part of me that really hoped he would put her in her place. Of course, someone like her still wouldn’t understand she’d done something wrong.

“Look here, you stuck-up little shit, you have two choices. The first is that you remove the shoe wedged up your ass and apologize to Marci. I figure there must be a four-inch stiletto wedged up there. It would certainly explain your

crappy personality.” Stitches moved in closer and leaned into her space. Her eyes went comically wide. “Your second option is to leave right this very second and hope we never cross paths again. The next time you see Marci in town you either keep walking or learn how to speak to her in a civil tone.”

Bonnie lifted her chin a notch and looked down her nose at Stitches. “Is that supposed to scare me? There’s nothing you can do to me. I’m completely untouchable to someone like you.”

“You really think so?” he asked. “How willing are you to test that theory? Would you bet your life on it?”

Bonnie gasped and pressed a hand to her chest. “Did you just threaten me?”

“I don’t make threats,” Stitches said. “Only chickenshit bastards who can’t follow through would do something like that. No, it was more of a promise. Come after Marci again, whether it’s verbally or physically, and you aren’t going to like the results.”

Without another word, he pushed past Bonnie, and we continued down the path. My heart hammered against my ribs. What had just happened? I wasn’t sure what to make of it, but I did know one thing... I found it incredibly sexy to watch him stand up for me that way.

Chapter Five

Stitches

Marci had been with me for twenty-four hours now, and at times I felt as if I were walking a precarious path. As much as I wanted to act as her shield, to carry her when she became tired, and protect her at all costs, I also knew she needed to learn to stand up for herself. She'd essentially been a slave for seven years. Finding herself and taking control of her life wouldn't be easy, and it would take her even longer if I helped her too much. I needed to find the right balance because it was the only way I could watch her get stronger.

When that bitch Bonnie Wetherby came up to us at the park, I'd never been so tempted to hit a woman. Her words also made me wonder what Richard had said when Marci disappeared. Surely the school had required some sort of paperwork. Surge was already looking into so much for me, but this was another thing to add to his list. I might not be able to kill Richard, but I could at least find out how he'd managed to pull this off. What if there were more men involved than the three names Marci knew? The men she remembered may have harmed her physically. However, I wondered if there were others who'd helped Richard place Marci into Vega's hands.

After our walk at the park, Marci had taken a nap when we got home. I'd made sure she'd eaten lunch, and then she'd gone to the apartments to visit the other women. While they might not have been friends previously, they did have a common trauma holding them together. I hoped she'd let

people in and be able to form friendships. She'd been alone long enough.

Discussing the past seven years with me was vastly different than talking to others who'd suffered the same fate. It was my hope that by spending time with those women Marci would begin to heal. They could rely on each other. Although my club would give them whatever support we could, only those who'd been held captive could truly understand what they needed.

I sent a text to Surge about the incident in the park, including Bonnie Wetherby's name. *Find out what Richard told the school after he sold Marci. I want to know if anyone else is involved. They might not have touched her but covering up his crimes doesn't make them any less responsible.*

Ever since Marci mentioned her brother selling her, I'd wondered where he'd come up with the idea and how he'd pulled it off. It wasn't the sort of thing a common criminal would be able to do. Richard might have been a rotten son of a bitch, but I hadn't thought he'd have those types of connections. It wouldn't surprise me at all to find out he had other illegal dealings, but prostituting and selling a teenage girl was on an entirely different level.

My phone rang and I saw Badger's name flash across the screen. I answered immediately. "Hey, Pres, what do you need?"

"I'm a little curious about why you kept Marci at your house overnight. It had damn well better have been for medical reasons."

I ran a hand down my face. "Yes and no."

“Explain,” Badger said.

“There are things in my past the club doesn’t know about. They’re personal and won’t impact the Devil’s Fury. Marci is a small piece of that past. I knew her when she was thirteen years old, or rather I knew her family. It wasn’t like I was hanging out with a teenager for nefarious purposes.”

Badger sighed. “I’d say the club is involved now. You aren’t just giving her medical treatment, are you? Like you said, this is personal, and if there’s one thing I know about my brothers, it’s that vengeance is in our blood. Tell me I’m wrong. Can you honestly say you don’t want to hurt every single person who’s touched Marci?”

How much could I tell him without having to talk about Laura and Rose? The more he dug into this the more questions he would have about my relationship with Marci’s family. It wouldn’t take much for him to discover the grave of my dead daughter. The death certificates for both Laura and Rose were safely tucked away in my dresser drawer, but it would only take one phone call for Badger to learn everything.

“My actions will be my own. The less you or anyone else knows the better. But you’re right, I have every intention of making them pay... in blood.”

“Of course, you do. As to how this will affect the club, I think that’s for me to decide. Unless, of course, you’re under the delusion that you’re in charge, in which case we have a whole other set of issues to deal with.”

I pinched the bridge of my nose and closed my eyes. Badger could be downright vicious when necessary, and I really didn’t want to be on his bad side. Why couldn’t he just leave this alone?

“I know I’m not in charge. I don’t *want* to fucking be in charge. However, I’ll do what’s best for Marci. Can you say the same?”

“You think I would do something to hurt her?” he asked.

“No, not intentionally. What I think is that as the president of the Devil’s Fury the club will always come first. Marci deserves to have someone put her before all others. You can’t do that, but I can... and I will. If that pisses you off and you want to kick my ass, then so be it. I failed her once before and I won’t do it again.”

The line was quiet, and I checked to make sure Badger hadn’t hung up. Had I taken things too far? Even if I had, I wasn’t going to back down now. Everything I’d said was true. The club couldn’t make her a priority, but I could. Badger and the other officers had to think of the bigger picture, assess the risk to not only our brothers but the families here, and decide what would be best for everyone. I was the only one who would consider what was best for Marci.

“You’ve failed her before?” Badger asked. “You know you’re only making me want to ask more questions, right? Knowing her as a teen, feeling as if you owe her something... It makes me wonder if you had a hand in the death of one or more of her family members. Just who the hell is she? What kind of connections does she have?”

This was quickly turning into a nightmare. I needed him to back the hell off, but he was like a dog with a Goddamn bone. No matter what I said he would keep pushing, needing to know more, until I had divulged everything. Anger started to brew inside me, building until I thought I might erupt. The

more I thought about the wound he'd been picking at, the more enraged I became. For the first time since joining this club, I wanted to knock the President the fuck out.

I knew I needed to hold back, to keep my temper and words in check. Knowing and doing are two very different things, and I wasn't sure I had the ability to take the higher road this time. He wanted more information? To know who the fuck Marci was? Fine.

"She's the aunt of my dead baby girl. Are you happy now, you asshole?" Before he had a chance to say anything, I disconnected the call. It wasn't nearly as satisfying as slamming down the handset of a landline phone. And just to make sure I didn't have to deal with anyone else's bullshit, I powered off my phone. If someone wanted to talk to me, they'd have to come do it in person.

I swallowed hard, noticing that my hand trembled. I'd spoken of Laura and Rose since discovering Marci once more, but it hadn't made this any easier. Until yesterday, I hadn't said their names in months. The only way I'd been able to deal with the pain of Rose's death was to try and forget about her. It wasn't easy, but I did my best to only acknowledge her when I visited their graves.

Marci wasn't the only one who needed to heal. Nothing I'd ever tried could dull the pain of losing my daughter. I stumbled my way to the bedroom and yanked open the dresser drawer. It only took me a moment to put my hands on Rose's death certificate. I traced her name with my fingertips and felt my eyes burning with unshed tears. *Rose Alanna Garrett.*

If she'd lived, she would have been ten this year. She'd never had the chance to open her eyes, to hear my voice as I

told her how pretty she was. My baby would never ride a bike, go to prom, or do anything the other kids at this compound would be able to do. The pain felt just as fresh today as it had the day she'd been born.

I sat on the floor and leaned back against the dresser, Rose's death certificate clutched in my hand. The nurse who'd helped me that day and let me hold my little girl had given me a precious gift. Since my club had never known about Rose, I'd never been able to display her little footprints. The nurse said it was something they did for all the parents, but I had a feeling she meant for those who had living children. Now that Badger knew it was only a matter of time before the rest of the club would. There was no reason to keep the frame hidden in my closet any longer.

I heard the front door open and close, then soft footsteps going through the house. I pressed the heels of my hands up to my eyes, trying to keep myself from crying. Someone knelt beside me, and I felt a soft touch on my thigh. As the person picked up the death certificate, I opened my eyes and saw the anguish on Marci's face.

"I have one for Laura too. It should belong to you."

Marci shook her head and I saw her lower lip trembling. "No, they should stay together. It only seems right."

She leaned against me and continued to stare at the paper. I'd been so focused on what it would take to help her heal, it never occurred to me we might be able to help each other. Although, if the thought of little Rose could still destroy me after all this time, I didn't think it was something I'd ever recover from. It would always feel as if a part of me were missing.

“Badger knows. He kept pushing me about why I’d brought you here, so I admitted that I’d known you when you were younger. It wasn’t enough. He just wouldn’t stop, and I finally snapped. Rose is no longer a secret. He knows that you’re her aunt.”

She sighed and laid the paper on my lap. “I’m sorry. I know you wanted to keep Laura and Rose to yourself, and not share them with your club. If I hadn’t come here, they would have never known.”

“Maybe it’s for the best. At least I won’t have to mourn them in private anymore. If they want me to share every detail of my life with them, then they can also help me shoulder the pain. It only seems fair, right?”

Marci laid her head on my shoulder. “You aren’t alone, Adam. You keep saying you’re here to help me, so let me help you too. There’s no reason we can’t grieve for them together. Richard never really allowed me to do that. He wanted to pretend Laura never existed.”

I cleared my throat and knew I needed to come clean. While it might not be certain her brother was dead, I needed to share Surge’s suspicions.

“Your brother is one of the men I asked a friend to look into. He wasn’t absolutely certain, but it seems likely Richard is dead. He probably crossed the wrong person and lost his life. I have to admit I feel a little cheated. It had been my plan to make him cry and beg. I wanted to watch him suffer before giving him a painful death.”

“That should probably frighten me, hearing you could be so violent. And yet it doesn’t. If anything, it’s a comfort knowing you would go so far to make me feel safe.”

We remained like that for at least another half hour. When I finally stood again, I put Rose's death certificate back in my drawer. Then I went to my closet and took down the frame with her tiny footprints. I showed it to Marci before hanging it in the hallway. I'd always envied people who had a hallway full of family photos. It only seemed right for this to be the first one I hung up, but I hoped I'd have others in the future. I couldn't say for certain who would be in them, but I had a feeling Marci would feature in several. It made me wish I had a picture of Laura to hang up.

I pulled out my phone and waited for it to power on, then accessed the photos I'd stored in the cloud. While Laura and I had been dating, we'd taken a few pictures together here and there. I even had one of Laura and Marci. It only took a moment to upload them to the local pharmacy's photo lab. Within the hour I'd be able to pick up the prints, and Marci and I could hang the photos.

"How would you feel about staying here indefinitely?" I asked.

"As what? Your dead girlfriend's sister? Your daughter's aunt?"

"For now, let's go with friend. We'll see where things go from there."

Marci nodded. "I can agree with that, but I'm not sure how your club will feel about it."

I put my arm around her shoulders and pulled her into my side. "Honestly? I don't really give a rat's ass right now. If they don't like it, they can fuck off. Besides, none of them are perfect. It's not as if they've never screwed up. What's that saying about glass houses? Every motherfucker here lives in

one, and they damn sure better not throw stones.”

I loved my club and I appreciated my brothers. It didn't mean I would let them dictate who I allowed to live in my house. They'd already given Marci permission to be here at the compound. It shouldn't matter what roof she slept under. My only concern was that they would decide I had to claim Marci in order for her to live with me.

Thinking about it, I realized it wouldn't be a problem for me. I didn't see her as a substitute for her older sister, or as the teen I'd once known. She'd grown up and become someone else. A woman I found to be beautiful, strong, and brave. But I'd make sure the club understood none of this was about me. I wouldn't claim Marci without asking her first. She'd been forced into enough situations already, and I refused to do that to her as well. To some it might not be the same thing, but it was still taking away her ability to choose, and that's something I would never do.

Chapter Six

Marci

It had been two weeks since Stitches brought me to his house. He'd been concerned about his club discovering how we'd known one another before and yet even after Badger found out, no one had brought it up. The club President might have pushed Stitches to say more than he'd wanted to, but it was clear he hadn't intended to cause any pain. If he had told anyone else in the Devil's Fury, it seemed he'd also made it clear for them to give Stitches some space.

Since the day I had found Stitches holding Rose's death certificate, things had changed between us. The entire house felt different. In addition to hanging her footprints in the hall, as well as a handful of pictures he'd kept from ten years ago, he'd also framed a few we'd taken in the last week. I still slept in the guest room, even though we'd been on a few dates, but this place was starting to feel like home.

The two of us were still broken, and there were times we were barely holding on. I'd noticed the heartbroken expression on Stitches' face every time he stopped to look at Rose's footprints. Since his daughter was no longer a secret, he could now openly grieve. It made me wish I had some sort of keepsake from the children I'd lost. I knew Stitches was trying to find my daughters. As badly as I wanted to cling to the hope I might one day see them, I tried to be realistic. There was a very good chance those girls were dead. Bronson hadn't been the type to hang on to something he felt was defective.

I felt a little antsy today. I'd agreed to see a therapist, but I hadn't liked the idea of going to an office for a visit. Instead, Stitches had made arrangements for someone to come to the house and speak with me, which was why I'd been pacing in the living room for the past ten minutes. The counselor had said she would arrive within the next few minutes.

Stitches put his hand on my back, drawing me a halt. "It's okay, Marci. Don't push yourself too hard, and just see how you feel speaking with the woman. If it's not a good fit, then we'll find someone else."

"I appreciate you trying to calm me down, but it's not working. The thought of reliving all those moments isn't pleasant."

"She might not dig into the hard stuff today. Take a breath, and just wait to see what happens. All right?"

I nodded, knowing he was right. I was getting all worked up for no reason. It wasn't like she was going to physically poke and prod at me. Although, the thought of someone digging through my brain wasn't pleasant either.

There was a knock at the door and Stitches went to answer it. I heard a soft voice speaking to him and forced myself to look at the woman who'd come to help me. She looked like she was only a decade older than me, if that, and wore a soft smile as she stepped into the house. Blonde hair hung past her shoulders in curls, and she'd dressed in what I considered business casual clothes.

"You must be Marci. It's nice to meet you." She held out her hand. "I'm Melissa Parks."

“Not doctor?” I asked.

“No. I have a Masters in Counseling, but decided not to pursue a doctorate. I wanted to start helping people as soon as possible, and be able to focus on my patients and not a dissertation.”

I only understood about half of what she said. Either way, she seemed nice. Some of the tension in my body eased. I sat on the couch and waited for her to take a seat as well. I noticed Stitches lingered in the doorway. He mouthed an *Are you all right?* I gave him a quick smile, and he gave me a nod before walking off.

“So, can you tell me a little about yourself?” Melissa asked, as she pulled out a notepad and pen.

I stared at her. Like what? My favorite color? How long I’d been a captive? Did she want my astrological sign? I didn’t like broad, open questions, and I really hoped the entire visit wouldn’t go this way.

“Think of this as a getting-to-know-you session,” Melissa said. “I thought we’d start with basic, easy things, and if you felt like you wanted to share more, that’s fine too. I’m here to help you, Marci. Not make you uncomfortable.”

“Except I have to talk about things that would give a normal person nightmares in order for you to help me heal. How is that *not* going to make me uncomfortable? Your very job is to do exactly that.”

“I can see how you’d think that.” Melissa wiggled a little and leaned back in the chair. “I know your name is Marci. You’re twenty-three years old. Stitches said your parents and siblings have all passed away. But those are all just facts

anyone can find out. I want to know more about who you are, Marci.”

This was going to be an incredibly long visit. I already felt exhausted. “No offense, Melissa, but even I don’t know who I am anymore.”

She jotted something onto her notepad. If she wanted to put me at ease, this wasn’t the way to do it. Would it be wrong to call Stitches back in here? I wasn’t sure I wanted to be alone with this person. Even though I didn’t feel any malicious intent from her, I still didn’t know how much I trusted her. She was a complete stranger. I knew Stitches had requested a woman, thinking a man would scare me. Maybe counselors in general were terrifying for me.

“You can talk about anything you’d like,” she said. “Or we can sit here in silence. This is about helping you, Marci. It doesn’t matter what I want. So if you want to share something, you’re more than welcome to. You could even talk about the weather. Just whatever pops into your head.”

“Is it like those free writing assignments in high school? We had to keep a notebook and write for the first ten minutes of class every day. There wasn’t ever a topic,” I said.

“A little like that, except this is verbal. Did you enjoy the free writing?”

“I did. Sometimes I’d write bits of stories or poetry. Other times I’d write about whatever was bothering me, or if something exciting happened.”

Melissa flashed me another smile. “That’s wonderful. What would you think about getting a notebook and doing some free writing again? Just whenever the mood strikes you?”

It could be therapeutic for you, and you wouldn't have to show it to anyone."

It wasn't an entirely awful idea. I really had enjoyed writing. There wasn't a reason I couldn't keep a journal or write some short stories. I didn't know why I hadn't thought of it before now.

"I'll ask Stitches to get me one and some pens," I said.

"He said the two of you have known each other for a while." She cast a glance toward the doorway and lowered her voice. "He's much older than you. I admit I'm curious how you met."

Of course, she was. Wouldn't surprise me if she wanted more than that, including the best way to ask him out. The man might be around forty, but he was still sexy. I wasn't sure of his exact age, and it didn't really matter. Boys as young as sixteen and men as old as seventy had used me and hurt me. I didn't understand why it mattered how old someone was, unless it was a legal issue. Since we were both adults, I didn't see a problem.

"He dated my sister," I said.

She must have remembered my siblings were dead because she immediately sobered. Good. At least I wouldn't have to worry about her chasing after Stitches. If she thought he was nursing a broken heart, maybe she'd keep her distance.

And why do you care? I wasn't ready to admit how much I needed him right now, and not in a *you're my security human* type of way. Although, he was certainly that for me too.

Melissa cleared her throat. "Aside from writing, were

there other things you used to enjoy doing?”

“Reading. I loved to read. Ram, the man who rescued me, let each of us pick out a book or magazine the day he freed us. I’d chosen a magazine at the time, but I wouldn’t mind reading some books again.”

“What sorts of things do you like reading?” she asked.

“I’m not picky. General fiction, thrillers, mysteries, romances, young adult books... I don’t really have a preference. It just has to catch my attention.” I’d even been known to read horror novels and comics from time to time. Of course, money had always been tight, so I’d mostly borrowed things from the library.

She made more notes on her little pad. I felt a bit like I was being dissected. So far, I wasn’t very fond of therapy. How long was she going to stay here? She’d said I could sit in silence. Wouldn’t that be even more awkward? I had a feeling she wouldn’t give up and leave.

“Why did you agree to come here?” I asked.

“Stitches spoke with me and said you would feel better meeting here rather than at my office,” she said.

Uh-huh. Why did I get the feeling she hadn’t come to the house strictly for me? I knew Stitches had a deep voice most women loved. The therapist had probably been the same and fallen for him sight unseen.

“It doesn’t make you nervous being at a compound full of bikers?” I asked.

“What about you? How do you feel being surrounded by all these men?”

“Safe,” I said. “One of them freed me from hell, and another would gladly destroy anything that dared to hurt me. These men may be rough around the edges, and terrifying to some people, but they cared enough to give us a place to stay. They didn’t look down on us for things that were out of our control.”

“Interesting. And you feel the average person would look down on you?” she asked.

I noticed she was taking notes again. Great. It made me paranoid about every word that came out of my mouth. What if she took something the wrong way?

“Whether it was by choice or force, the fact of the matter is that I was a prostitute. The people who held me captive took money from men and let them use me however they wanted. I’ve been tied down for hours while multiple men took turns. Some liked using their weight to pin me face down onto the bed. I’ve had men buy me for their sons, as a way of making real men out of them. Others were old enough to be my grandfather, and they got off on humiliating me. Is this what you want to hear?” I noticed in the middle of my little speech she’d gone from frantically taking notes to being frozen with her eyes wide. “Did you want to hear how much they liked listening to me scream and plead for mercy? About all the depraved things they made me endure? The constant fear that if I ever caught anything, I’d be tossed to diseased customers and I’d die an excruciating death?”

The pen fell from her fingers and her face paled. I wasn’t sure if she was seconds from bolting out the door, or if she might pee herself in fear. She might even do both. I’d never seen someone look so terrified before while being in a

perfectly safe room.

“You want me to talk, so you can help me overcome my trauma, but I’m not sure how you can. Is there really a way you could ever understand the things I’ve been through? Have you ever had a group of men fuck you so hard and for so many hours that you were literally left ripped apart and bleeding?” My hands shook and fury started to fill me. They’d treated me like a toy. Some piece of trash they could do whatever they wanted with. I’d never been a person in their eyes. Did she see me as one? Along with the fear in her eyes, I also saw a bit of revulsion. “I think we’re done, Melissa. And not just for today. You can’t help me. I’m not sure anyone can.”

I stood and planned to storm out of the room when I saw Stitches in the doorway. The tightness of his jaw, the tension radiating from his body, and the pain in his gaze was enough to tell me he’d heard it all. The things that had spilled from me just now were only the tip of the iceberg, so to speak. I’d suffered through so much worse. Even if I combined every horror movie or true crime series that involved the trafficking of women, or the brutal rape and murder of them, it probably still wouldn’t cover everything I’d experienced firsthand.

When I went out into the world beyond the gates, I felt like I was putting on a show. It was like I wore a mask once I left the compound. But here, at Stitches’ house and inside the fence, I didn’t worry about those things quite so much. I had at first. The longer I remained with Stitches, the more at ease I felt. He didn’t treat me like filth. To him, I was just Marci. A little more damaged than when he’d last seen me, but that was all. Even now, I could almost read his thoughts.

I approached him and put my arms around his waist.

He held me close, giving me a tight hug. “I’m fine. I lost my temper, but I’ll be okay.”

“Not sure I will be,” he muttered.

“I don’t want to speak with her anymore,” I said. “Can you make her leave?”

“You heard her. Get the fuck out. I’ll send a payment to your office for today,” Stitches said. “Don’t plan on counseling any of the women or children with the Devil’s Fury. I’ll make sure Badger knows your office is off-limits. You clearly can’t handle the darker side of life. Stick with teens going through puberty, or women who have wayward husbands. Something safe.”

I heard the rustle behind me, letting me know she was getting her things together. Stitches moved us to the side, and I watched as Melissa left.

“She has to keep all this confidential, right?” I asked.

“Yeah. If she breathes a word of anything to the people in town, I’ll make sure the hackers destroy her life. She’ll never be a counselor again.”

His words gave me some comfort.

“No more therapists, Adam. Not unless you can find one who’s experienced even a fraction of what I’ve been through. Otherwise, they’ll never be able to understand and help me.”

“Whatever you want or need. You know I’ll give it to you,” he said, kissing the top of my head. “You’re my priority, Marci.”

That was nice. I liked knowing I was the most

important person to him for the moment. Being able to hold onto him, knowing he'd catch me if I fell, was more than enough for right now. As long as I had Stitches, I didn't need anything or anyone else.

Chapter Seven

Stitches

Even though it had been two weeks since Marci had met with the therapist, I partly felt like I'd been too harsh on the woman, and at the same time, I'd needed Marci to know I was firmly in her corner. I'd done what I thought was best for her. If the little therapist couldn't handle it, then that was on her. She might be a counselor, but it didn't make her equipped to handle every situation, and Marci's was far from the norm.

I did need to thank her, though. When Marci erupted, it broke the protective shield she'd subconsciously placed to keep her safe from the trauma she'd suffered. I didn't like that she was in pain, but I knew it was needed in order for her to heal. Much like myself. Ever since I snapped at Badger about Rose, I'd been able to properly grieve for my daughter.

No one in the club had mentioned her name. If Badger had told anyone, they were giving me space. Maybe one day I'd be ready to share her with the club. Right now, I didn't think I could handle talking about her. I did discuss her and Laura with Marci, but that was different. She'd lost them too. As much as I wished Marci would also open up with me, she still kept a lot of things locked up inside. I didn't know if she'd worry how I'd react, or if she didn't want to voice the things she'd lived through. Either way, I'd respect her wishes and try not to push her too much. I still felt she needed to talk about it. Didn't mean it had to be with me.

We'd settled into a routine. Since the therapy incident,

I'd taken Marci on several dates and we often watched movies together on the couch. She'd never had a chance to learn much in the way of cooking or baking, so I'd bought her a few recipe books. I didn't force her to make anything, but it at least gave her the option if she wanted to try something different. All she had to do was give me or a Prospect a list of ingredients, and we'd make sure she had everything she needed.

I sat at the kitchen table, watching as she rolled out the dough she'd made for biscuits, then used a round cookie cutter to cut them out. She placed them on the baking sheet before folding the leftover dough and rolling it once more. She seemed serene as she worked on the biscuits.

"Are you having fun?" I asked.

"A little? I only hope these turn out better than the last ones."

I bit the inside of my cheek so I wouldn't laugh. The first batch she'd made had a missing ingredient and came out hard as rocks. With the second one she accidentally grabbed the canister of sugar and not salt. It might not have been very noticeable except she'd also used the incorrect amount. But as long as she enjoyed herself, I didn't care how bad they were. Seeing her happy was the important thing.

My phone buzzed on the table and I checked the screen. *Surge*. Without hesitating, I answered, hoping he had good news. "This is Stitches."

"I found the girls," he said.

I tensed and cast a quick glance at Marci. Thankfully, she remained focused on her baking. I stood and walked out to the living room.

“Where?” I asked.

“They’re actually close to you. Three towns over in Dog Creek. Looks like their sperm donor dumped them on the steps of a church. Or more likely he hired someone to. From there, they were adopted as infants. The family died in a car crash when they were a year old, and they’ve been stuck in the system ever since.”

Shit. That made things a little complicated. Even if I had DNA proof they belonged to Marci, there was no way anyone would hand them over. She didn’t have a job, any identification, and her school records would show she’d been sent to a mental institution.

“How do I get them back?” I asked.

“They’re three and a half, and their names are Vanessa and Melanie, in case you wondered. As to how you can claim them, Wire and I can work on something. Is it safe for anyone else to know about this?”

“I told Badger about my daughter. He knows how I’m connected to Marci, but I didn’t tell anyone about the girls. I didn’t want to give Marci false hope, and you know the guys here can’t always keep a secret. They’d say something to their women, then they’d in turn tell Marci.”

“Right.” He laughed a little. “Same for our club. At least, now that we have more women here. Hold off on saying anything to Marci until I figure this out. Once I give you the address of where those girls are staying, grab your woman and go.”

Um. My woman? “I think there’s some confusion. Marci isn’t my woman. We live together, but we use separate

rooms.”

“Uh-huh. And if she needs a husband in order to make this work?”

It felt like my heart stopped. Not once had I ever considered getting married, not even to Laura. I wasn't sure how I felt about it, nor did I know if Marci would agree.

“Let me find a way to bring it up with her. I don't want to scare the shit out of her and send her running.”

“Understood. Just text me when you get an answer,” he said, then hung up.

I stared at the phone. What the hell was I supposed to tell her? If I said we might need to be married for her to get her daughters back, she'd be eager to hold them in her arms. What if something went wrong? I didn't think Marci could handle losing them a second time. Hell, I hadn't even met them and even I felt apprehensive about this situation. Surge had been right to suggest I keep it to myself for now, even though I wasn't sure how long I could hide it from her.

“Everything okay?” she asked, wiping her hands on a kitchen towel. “It seemed like an important call, so I gave you some space.”

“I appreciate it.” I held my hand out to her and Marci came to me, placing her palm against mine. I closed my fingers over hers, and just held on for a moment. “I have a question and I'm not sure how to ask it.”

“Just ask,” she said. “How bad could it be? Do you want me to leave?”

“What the fuck? Of course not.”

“Then ask me whatever it is.”

I nodded and tried to think of the best way to phrase it. “If there was a chance something really good could happen... No. Not that. Um. There are things you may want that you couldn’t have on your own. So, if that happened, would you consider being my wife?”

Her brow furrowed as she stared at me. “You’re confusing me. None of that made any sense. It was like word salad. Did you secretly down a bottle of Jack before you came in here?”

“No.” I ran a hand over my face. “Your girls, Marci. If there’s a way to find them, but you can’t have them unless you’re married, would you consider being my wife?”

She tensed. “What? My girls? You found them?”

Shit. This was why I hadn’t wanted to ask. Fucking Surge! Normally, the hackers just married people without bothering to get anyone’s opinion. In this case, that could have blown up in all our faces. Especially mine, since that wasn’t the way I wanted to handle things. Marci deserved to have a choice in being tied to a man. But this wasn’t much better.

“I don’t want you to get your hopes up. It’s why I didn’t want to say anything, but the person locating them said it might only be possible to transfer custody to you if you have a spouse. The fact you’re young, don’t have a job, and the girls were most likely abandoned doesn’t look good. There’s no proof you didn’t decide you didn’t want them after they were born.”

She audibly swallowed and I saw a sheen of tears in her eyes. “You’re right. As to what I’d do to have them back?

Anything. Everything. Whatever it takes. So if you're willing to marry me in order to make sure I can have custody of them, then yes. I will gladly accept."

"That's all I needed to know." I sent her response to Surge. He texted back almost immediately with *on it*.

Although, we did need to discuss what the marriage would look like. Since I refused to be with any woman other than my wife, I wasn't thrilled with the idea she might never share a bed with me. It didn't mean I'd force her, though. She could take as much time as she needed, and if she decided she never wanted to be intimate with me, then we'd keep separate rooms. Or share a bed and do nothing but sleep beside one another.

"What happens now?" she asked.

"Surge will most likely hack into the government offices to file a marriage license for us and put a certificate on file. Legally, we'll be married. If you'd prefer an actual wedding, let me know."

She shook her head. "I don't need one. Does this mean I should move my things into your room? Or wait until we hear more?"

"Well, I guess it depends on what type of marriage you want."

"Isn't there only one kind?" she asked.

Sweet, naive girl. "No, honey. There are different types. We could keep separate rooms if you aren't ready to be intimate or think you never will be. Or you can go ahead and move in now, and we can sleep beside each other. Doesn't mean we need to have sex. I'll let you set the pace and

guidelines for this relationship. Only thing I demand is loyalty. I won't cheat on you, and I expect the same courtesy in return."

She tipped her head to the side, reminding me of an inquisitive puppy. "Is that normal? For men like you to not cheat, even if they aren't getting sex from their wives?"

I had a feeling she meant bikers in general, or at least outlaw ones. Part of me wanted to be offended, and yet I couldn't. I'd met too many clubs who had women at home and still fucked the club whores. Their women might accept it, but ours would raise hell. Even worse, it would hurt them, and I knew none of us wanted to hurt the woman we'd claimed as our own. It went against everything we believed in.

"This club, and quite a few others I know of, don't cheat on their women. If I were to do that to you, Badger would probably beat the hell out of me, assuming someone else didn't get to it first. Besides, I'd never do that to you, Marci."

I could tell from the look in her eyes she wasn't certain she believed me. I'd have to prove to her she could trust me, even with her heart. No, *especially* with her heart. She'd already come a long way since the first day she'd arrived here. It would take time for her to figure out her new normal, but I was damn proud of her. Marci came out of her shell a little more every day.

"Would you have married Laura?" she asked.

It wasn't the first time she'd brought it up, but I knew she wanted a more in-depth response than I'd given so far. In fact, we spoke of Laura and Rose nearly every day. I felt torn. As much as I wanted her to feel special, I also didn't want to

make her feel as if I didn't value her sister, or care about her.

“Laura was a sweet woman, and she was better than I deserved. You are, too, in case you were wondering. Even though we had Rose, no, I wouldn't have married her. The club life wouldn't have been right for her. While she'd been through hardships, it's not the same as the other women here. They carry deeper wounds, like yours, or they grew up in this life. I think this would have been too much for Laura to handle, and she'd have been miserable.”

Marci nodded. “You may be right. I guess we'll never know.”

I reached out to lightly touch her cheek. “You're not second best, Marci. Don't even think that, all right? I'm not settling for you. If I hadn't thought we could have a good life together, I wouldn't have offered to marry you. I wouldn't have moved you into my house.”

“I have these moments where I feel like I'm doing better and have a little confidence. Then at others, I want to curl up in a ball in a corner and shut out the world. Does that make sense?”

I pulled her into my arms and hugged her. “Yeah, it does.”

“Can I move into your room even if we don't need to be married to bring my girls home?” she asked.

“That's a big step, Marci. I told you that you could keep your current room even if you were my wife. Are you sure you're ready for something like that?”

“Well, you said we could just sleep in the same bed, right? Could we try that for tonight? Maybe even a few

nights?”

“Of course.” I kissed the top of her head. “We can do whatever you want.”

“I’ll go grab my things.” She smiled up at me and hurried to her room. Normally, I’d have offered to help, but something told me Marci needed to do this on her own. It was more than just sharing a room. She’d taken a huge step just now, one I hadn’t expected.

My phone vibrated and I saw I had a message from Surge. *You sure you want a wife and kids? You’ll never have another moment of peace.*

I snickered, wondering if his family was driving him crazy. I’d heard he’d claimed not only a woman but a man as well. The thought of three adults plus kids in a house was enough to give me a headache. I couldn’t imagine the chaos over there.

I’m sure. I hit send, and he replied almost instantly.

Then you’ll be married before morning. Also, I’m sending you the address where you can find Vanessa and Melanie. Go get your daughters tomorrow.

My throat felt tight as I stared at his words. Damn. Wife and kids, huh? Daughters? I only wished Rose could be here. She deserved to be part of our family. No matter how sad I felt over her loss, I’d shower my new daughters with love and attention. They’d never replace my little Rose, but maybe they’d help heal my heart.

I found Marci in my room, staring at the dresser, and I realized I hadn’t cleared out any space for her. I quickly emptied two drawers and made sure she had a place to hang

things in the closet. Wouldn't hurt to get another dresser sometime soon, especially since I knew she needed more clothes.

Shit. We needed to furnish a room for our daughters. I glanced at my watch and saw the furniture store would be closing in the next two hours.

“Mrs. Marci Garrett, we need to go get a few things.”

The name caught her attention. “The girls... we can get them? Your friend knows where they are?”

I nodded. “We can bring them home tomorrow, which means they need a room set up. Furniture, clothes, toys, and whatever else three-and-a-half-year-old little girls need. You up for some power shopping?”

She bounced on her toes and a radiant smile curled her lips. It was the most excited I'd seen her since she'd been a teenager. It looked like those two little ones were going to heal Marci as well. They'd need the best from us, so neither of us could afford to wallow or fall apart. From now on, we needed to provide a stable home for our daughters.

“Their names are Vanessa and Melanie. I'm not sure how they'd feel about having them changed,” I said. “I'm sorry you weren't able to name them yourself.”

“It's okay. I don't care as long as I get to hold them.”

“You okay to go out like that?” I asked, noting her cotton shorts and tank. It showed off some of her scars, which I knew she remained sensitive about.

“Yes. Anything for my babies.”

I held out my hand. “Then let's go!”

Chapter Eight

Marci

I had butterflies in my stomach, and my hands trembled. He'd found my daughters! I wondered what they looked like, if they'd been happy... Would I be wrecking their lives by bringing them home? Despite the number of questions swirling through my mind, fear held me back from asking any of them. Would Stitches go pick them up if they had amazing lives? As much as I wanted to say no, I was leaning more toward *Yes, he damn well would*. Since he'd lost his daughter, he knew how I'd felt all this time. Although, he'd at least known he'd never see Rose again. I'd been left wondering if my daughters were dead or alive, or they were being raised by a monster.

We'd made quick work of picking out two toddler beds and mattresses, both exactly the same. Identical bedding had also been added to the cart, and a matching toy box and bookshelf. Once we'd finished at the furniture store, he'd taken me to the nearest Target, where I'd picked up clothes and toys. Since neither of us had seen the girls yet, he'd asked his friend if there was a way to determine their sizes. I didn't know how he'd managed it, but he had.

The look of complete concentration on Stitches' face as he studied the stuffed animals nearly made me laugh. I also wanted to pick out things our girls would love, but he looked like this was a life-or-death decision. I placed my hand on his arm. But the way he studied the dolls in front of him also

made me wonder if he was every bit as excited as I was. He'd lost little Rose, but this was a chance for him to have a family again.

"You know, we don't have to pick only one. And not everything has to be identical. I'm sure it would cut down on fighting, but for all we know, they don't mind having different items." I wished I knew those things about my daughters. I'd have loved to have held them when they were born, named them, rocked them to sleep... I'd missed out on so much.

"I don't want to spoil them, but I also want them to feel welcome," he said. "How do I find the middle ground?"

"You're asking the wrong person. We're learning all this together."

It warmed my heart, knowing he was putting so much thought into this. When he'd told me about the girls, and offered to marry me if it meant I could have custody of them, I hadn't realized he'd jump into this one hundred percent. Even when Stitches and Laura had been together, and she'd been pregnant with Rose, it hadn't occurred to me he'd be a great dad. I should have known, considering how amazing he was by always including me in family dinners and movie nights when he dated my sister. My little girls were going to be so lucky to have a guy like him in their lives.

I still couldn't believe they were alive! It felt surreal, and incredibly scary. Whoever had found them, I owed them much more than a thank-you. Same for Stitches. If it weren't for him, no one would have searched for them to begin with. As much as I wanted to hold my babies, I also worried I might be disrupting their lives. They had no idea who I was. I'd missed a little over three years of their lives.

In addition to the mattresses and bedding, we'd picked out a curtain for the window. Once we put everything together, shelved the books, and completed the room as best we could, I hoped this would be a welcoming space for our daughters. I couldn't wait to read them bedtime stories, and I knew Stitches looked forward to it too.

Even if he hadn't found the girls, I'd have still married him if he'd asked. He'd given me back my life. Ram might have brought me to the Devil's Fury, but until I'd seen Stitches, I'd not really been fully present. More than once, I'd thought about ending it all. When I'd been a captive, I hadn't had the chance to do anything. But the freedom of the apartment was another story. Stitches probably had no idea how close he'd been to walking into that place and finding a dead body. I'd thought everything was over. I'd only wanted the pain to go away.

I sat on the floor, leaning against the wall, as he put the furniture together. The bedding had been washed and was ready to go onto the little toddler beds, and their clothes were in the washer now. Thanks to Surge, we'd been able to figure out what sizes we needed to buy. I had no idea how he'd managed, but I was grateful. From what I'd been able to piece together, it seemed us getting the girls was a mix of illegal hacking and the system working off the information Surge planted. However, it was happening, I just knew I'd soon have my girls in my arms. Vanessa and Melanie. I didn't particularly love the names, but I didn't want to change them. They'd had those names for three years, and I didn't want to confuse them. They'd have enough of an adjustment already.

“Are you sure you don't need help?” I asked.

“I’m almost done. Let me tighten this one nut, and then I’ll put the mattresses on the beds. You can make them while I start on the toy box.”

“What if they don’t like us?” I asked, as I stood and picked up the bedding. “We’re strangers to them. They could be scared of us.”

Stitches came over and put his arms around me. “Everything is going to be fine, Marci. I’m sure they’ll be a little scared at first. It’s a new home, new people. The youngest kids here are a little older than them, but I’m sure they’ll make friends.”

He always seemed to know exactly what to say to calm me down. He was right. If the girls hadn’t been adopted at birth, then they’d likely moved around quite a few times. This wouldn’t be much different from those other times, except they were coming to the home they’d have for the rest of their lives.

I made their beds and placed a teddy bear on each. One had a purple bear and the other had a pink one. I’d let the girls decide which bed and toy they wanted. It would be a good start to figuring out their personalities. They might be twins, but I knew they’d like different things. What sibling ever liked every single thing the other one did? I had never met any.

Stitches finished the toy box and I put the rest of their items in there. He’d already put the bookshelf together. We’d put the storybooks on the top shelf, and filled the lower ones with puzzles, coloring books, and crayons. I wished we’d gotten them a small table and chairs, but the room wasn’t overly large. It would have looked crowded in here if we’d done that. They’d have to sit on the floor, or at the kitchen

table if they wanted to color.

“When can we pick them up?” I asked.

Stitches shook his head at me. “I already told you that, at least twice. Settle down, Marci. I know you’re both excited and nervous. I get it. You’re not the only one eager to get them home.”

I paused and watched him a moment. We hadn’t discussed the father aspect of things. Stitches would be their dad, but... What if the girls asked about their birth father? I didn’t know what was on their birth certificates. They wouldn’t be in the system without one. Had that bastard listed himself as their dad? Or were both the mother and father spots blank? My poor babies!

“I feel you staring a hole through me. Just say whatever’s on your mind, Marci.”

“It occurred to me I have no idea what information is on their birth certificates. I wouldn’t have been listed as their mother. Do they not have parents on there at all?” I asked.

“Well, let’s ask Surge how he’s handled it,” Stitches said. He stopped what he was doing and took out his phone. After calling the number, he put it on speaker. The second the call connected Stitches started speaking. “I’m here with Marci and she had a good question. Are there any parents listed on the girls’ birth certificates?”

“It’s taken all of us all damn night working on this, but yeah. We backdated stuff and covered our tracks. As of a few hours ago, the girls list the two of you as their parents. We also planted a report about two stolen babies around the time they would have been born, which also meant we had to hack

hospital records to plant evidence there as well. It's been hell, but it will be worth it once they're home with you."

Tears burned my throat and stung my eyes. "Thank you. I know that's nowhere near enough, but —"

"Marci, we're happy to do this kind of thing. Doesn't matter how difficult it is," Surge said. "In case Stitches didn't tell you, the two of you can pick up the girls in the next three hours."

He'd told me multiple times, and yet it amazed me I'd get to see them so soon. I rubbed my hands up and down my thighs. My heart felt like it was racing, and there was a slight flutter in my stomach.

"Thanks, Surge. Tell everyone else we really appreciate all the work you've put into this," Stitches said.

He ended the call, and I wanted to run to the car and go get the babies right then and there. Looking around the room, I knew we were close to being done. I needed to finish washing their clothes and put them away. Since I hadn't known if they were potty trained, I'd also picked up a small package of pull-ups.

"You don't need to get all of the clothes washed," Stitches said. "Just finish the load you have going now, put the next one in, and we'll fold and put away anything that's ready before we go."

"You already put the car seats into the truck, right?" I asked.

"Done. And I'm going to look online tonight and purchase a new SUV for you. Did you get your license?"

“I haven’t driven a car since I was sixteen. You trust me with a brand-new SUV?” I asked.

“We can drive around the compound several times, and I can ride with you the first few times you’re out around town. If you’d prefer, we can ask someone to watch the girls when you practice driving.”

I nodded. With the girls, I’d need transportation. Relying on someone else to get me to and from the grocery, or getting the girls to any doctor appointments, would be a hassle for everyone involved. As long as Stitches wasn’t worried about me wrecking it, then it should be fine. The thought of driving after so long scared me a bit.

“What should we do for dinner tonight?” I asked. “I’m not sure what they like to eat.”

“All kids like McDonald’s, or so it seems. We could take them to the one with a playground. They might enjoy something like that,” Stitches said. “And I only know about it because of the kids here at the compound. The smaller ones like going there every now and then.”

“When do we need to leave?” I asked.

He checked his watch. “Well, we can’t get them just yet, but we should probably leave within the next two hours. I’m not familiar with the town they’re in, so that will give us a little time to find the place where they’re staying.”

I sighed, wishing he’d said we could leave sooner. I moved their clothes to the dryer, then started another load. Since I had plenty of time to kill, I made sure the house was picked up, dishes cleaned, and double-checked everything I thought we might need for the girls. Time seemed to crawl. I

managed to finish not only the first load of their laundry, but also the second. After I put everything away, I took another shower and changed my clothes.

Stitches stood by the door, keys in hand. He smiled and reached out to take my hand. Even though it was still sooner than he'd said we'd need to leave, he could clearly tell I'd reached my max level of patience. If I'd had to wait another second, I might have screamed.

“Let's get our daughters,” he said.

He helped me into the truck and helped me buckle up. My hands were shaking so badly I couldn't get it to click into place. Once we hit the road, I kept glancing at the map on his phone, watching the minutes tick down to our arrival.

“You know, I'm surprised you use that,” I said.

“What? A map?” he asked.

“Yeah. I thought men never asked for directions.”

“Smart ass,” he muttered. “It's not asking if the phone tells me where to go.”

I nearly rolled my eyes at his man-logic. At least he hadn't changed the voice on his phone. If he had, I'd have given him a hard time about his electronic girlfriend. One of the men who'd held me captive had changed his so the woman spoke with an Australian accent. He always talked about how sexy she sounded.

For the first time in years, I could look back on that memory without wanting to scrub my skin off or hide in a dark room. Baby steps. I didn't think I'd ever reach a point those years wouldn't bother me to some degree, but perhaps I

wouldn't panic when they did come to mind. This time, I wasn't rocking or chewing on my fingers. I looked over at Stitches and realized he was a large part of why I wasn't coming unglued right now. Whether he knew it or not, he'd been a great help to me.

"You're amazing. I don't think I've told you that yet, but you are," I said.

His brow furrowed. "Not sure what I did for that kind of praise."

"You're just... you. All the trouble you went through to find the girls and make a place for them in your house. Bringing me home with you that first day. Giving me anything I needed or wanted. You're the only person who's ever done that stuff for me."

"You're pretty awesome too, Marci. A lot of people wouldn't have survived everything you've been through. Not only did you pull through, but here we are, going to get our kids. We're married. You're doing so much better mentally, or so it seems. I'm really proud of you."

His words warmed me. I wasn't sure what our future would look like, or how this would work, but I knew we'd manage somehow. With Stitches as their dad, I knew my girls would be loved and adored. He'd also shown me how supportive he was, and I knew he wouldn't let me flounder. Even though I hadn't had a chance to be around small children, and the thought of raising my own scared me, he'd pick up the slack. I wouldn't even have to ask him.

I saw the sign for the town where my girls had been staying and clutched my hands together in my lap. Almost there! Not much longer and I'd to see my babies for the first

time. All the what-ifs kept going through my mind, and I tried to shut them out.

He pulled to a stop in front of a small, gray house. I saw toys scattered across the yard, and a curtain in the front window fluttered as if someone had just peered out at us. Stitches turned off the engine and reached over to take my hand.

“Ready?” he asked.

“Yes and no.”

“Come on. Let’s go see our kids,” he said. We got out of the truck and walked up to the front door. An older woman opened it and gave us a suspicious look.

“Who are you?” she asked.

“Adam and Marci Garrett. We’re here to pick up our daughters,” Stitches said. It surprised me to hear him offer up his real name, but then again, it made sense. It wasn’t like any official documents would have *Stitches* on them.

“Still seems strange to me. How do you lose your children?” she asked, backing up. “Come on in. The girls are in the living room.”

We followed her inside and I saw my precious babies. They were sitting together, holding hands, as they watched a cartoon on TV. I didn’t see any other children nearby and wondered if our girls were the only two she had. Was she a foster parent? Or had she adopted them?

“Vanessa? Melanie?” Calling out their names, and seeing their little faces, felt so surreal.

They stood up but didn’t approach us. Stitches knelt

down to their level and gave them a smile. “Hey, girls. We’ve been looking for you for a long time. Do you know who we are?”

One of them shook her head no, while the other inched a little closer. “Are you my daddy?”

Stitches held his hand out to her. “Yes, I am. And this is your mommy next to me. We came to take you home.”

“Why did it take so long?” she asked.

I marveled at how well she could speak. The other little one remained silent. I’d thought at their age, they would be hard to understand. It seemed I had a very smart cookie on my hands.

“A bad person took you from us before we even got a chance to hold you. It made us both very sad, and your mommy has cried a lot. But we didn’t give up, and we were finally able to find you.”

The little girl went the rest of the way to Stitches and put her arms around his neck. He hugged her tight and closed his eyes, but not before I saw the sheen of tears. The trust she’d just shown him, and the feel of her in his arms, had hit him hard.

“I’m Vanessa,” she murmured. “And that’s Melanie.”

“Vanessa is a mouthful. Can I call you Nussy?” he asked.

I wanted to rebuke him and tell him our child was *not* a lake monster, but the way her face lit up held me back. It seemed she liked having a pet name.

“Yes! What about Melanie?” she asked.

“Melly?” I asked. I moved closer to the other girl and kneeled down. “Would you like to be called Melly?”

She gave a hesitant nod and came to me. She leaned into me, even though she didn’t put her arms around me. I hugged her gently, and nearly burst into tears. My baby was finally where she belonged. Looking over at Stitches and Nessy, I knew this was a moment I’d remember for the rest of my life.

“You can give up on getting that one to talk,” the foster mom said. “She’s never uttered a word.”

I didn’t like the fact my daughter had never spoken. Had she been too afraid? Was there something physically wrong that kept her from speaking?

“Are you two ready to go home?” Stitches asked.

“Yes, Daddy,” Nessy said.

He picked her up and carried her out of the house, pausing to thank the woman for taking care of the girls. I lifted Melly and put her on my hip as I walked out the front door. We buckled the girls into their car seats and started the trip back home. It felt like a weight had been lifted from me, and I hoped this was the beginning of many more happy days.

Chapter Nine

Stitches

Nessy filled the silence with a constant stream of chatter. Melly, however, hadn't said a single word. She was either shy, or there was something more going on. For now, we'd let them play and get something to eat before taking them home. No point in worrying until the girls had a chance to settle into their new home. If Melly still wouldn't speak in a few days, then we could address the issue.

Marci kept turning around to see the girls and speak with them. Despite the fact I needed to keep my eyes on the road, I did find myself glancing in the rearview mirror to watch them here and there. They were smaller than I'd anticipated. Even buying their clothes earlier, it hadn't hit me how tiny they would be.

There was one thing I hadn't told Marci. The club didn't know the girls were coming home. I should have called Badger and spoken with him. Truthfully, the club had been all kinds of fucked-up for a while now. After everything that happened with Doolittle and later with Meredith, I wasn't sure I wanted to ask anyone's opinion on whether or not I could have my family live with me. There had been a time I'd been proud to be part of the Devil's Fury. I knew the club still did a lot of good in the community, but we felt more like a dysfunctional family right now.

I'd deal with the fallout later. Badger would probably yell, try to make an example of me, and then... Well, I'd

figure it out when it happened. I respected the hell out of Badger, and I knew Grizzly had chosen him for a reason. It didn't mean I always agreed with him. Sometimes, it felt like he had tunnel vision when Adalia or her sisters were involved. Then there was the fiasco with Meredith and Doolittle. That poor girl had been lashing out, trying to gain our attention, and we'd all failed her. Yeah. I included myself in that. Instead of admitting we fucked up, everyone tried to ignore the fact Meredith needed help.

I knew the fact Grizzly chose to spend so much of his last days with Meredith hadn't helped. Adalia, Shella, and Lilian had all been hurt by his choice. Personally, I understood why he'd done it. How long had it been since he'd spent time with Meredith? He'd seen the others every day while she'd been gone. To me, his choice had been perfectly fair. Adalia seemed better about everything. I think she'd moved on to some extent, but it didn't do her much good when the others were holding onto their resentment.

Then there was Mariah and Farrah. I didn't know what bug crawled up their asses, but I was tired of their shit, and I knew quite a few other people were as well. Grizzly hadn't been related to them. Meredith was now since she'd married their uncle, and yet they still treated her like trash. I knew Demon had done his best to knock some sense into Farrah, but Savage was going to keep babying Mariah.

"You're thinking awfully hard," Marci said softly. I hadn't realized until then the girls were both quiet. The McDonald's I'd mentioned was only a block away. My thoughts weren't for little ears.

"We'll talk while they play. We're nearly there." She

gave me a nod and I pulled into the parking lot. The girls were still quiet even as we got out of the truck. That's when it hit me. They'd never been to a McDonald's before. I kneeled down in front of them. "Would the two of you like to go to the playground and have something to eat?"

Nessy looked at Melly before turning back to me. "Doesn't it cost too much?"

I wanted to put my fist through something hearing her words. These girls should have had everything they could ever want or need. Instead, they'd never even had a chance to have fast food. Sure, it wasn't as cheap as it had been when I was a kid, but it still wasn't as costly as going to a nicer restaurant, which meant they'd never been to one of those either.

"No, sweetheart. The two of you can order as much as you want. If you can't finish everything, you can take it home in case you want a snack later. Or if you don't like what you get, we'll toss it." I reached for her hand. "Things are going to be different now, Nessy. The two of you have a room waiting for you at home with toys, new clothes, and your mom picked out your bedding and curtains."

She glanced at Melly and took her sister's hand. "Then we'd like to go play."

I stood and led them inside with Marci taking Melly's other hand. It put the girls between us, which I hoped made them feel secure. Nessy gave me the order for both of them, then the girls went with Marci to the playground. I placed our order, having to assume my wife still liked the same thing she used to order, and then waited until they called our number. I grabbed the trays and carried them to the play area before going back to fill our cups.

This might not be the most nutritious meal ever, but I hoped it would be an icebreaker with the girls. I wanted them to have fun, to try new things, and I'd thought this might be a good way to gain a small amount of their trust. They needed to see being with us would be different from what they'd experienced so far.

"What was bothering you in the car?" Marci asked when I sat down.

"Thinking about the club. I didn't tell Badger I was bringing the girls home, or that we were married."

She froze with a chicken nugget halfway to her mouth. "What?"

"You heard me." The nugget dropped from her fingers back into the carton as she stared at me with her eyes wide and lips parted. I'd never seen her so surprised before. "I'll ask him to call Church when I get back. I hate to run out and leave you and the girls alone, but it needs to be done."

"It's fine. This is important. How could you keep this from the club? This seems like the type of thing your President would need to know, at least as a courtesy if nothing else. I may not know Badger very well, but I bet he's going to be furious."

I nodded. She was right. He'd be pissed. And for once, I didn't give a shit. Maybe this was what the club needed as a wake-up call. I'd been a member for a long-ass time, and my loyalty had never been questioned. But the shit with Meredith and the other women was enough to make me consider walking away. That's not the type of environment I wanted the girls, or Marci, to be part of. I had a feeling Ram felt the same way about the two staying at his house. Not only was Riley his

daughter by blood, but he'd married Talia. If I were in Ram's shoes, I'd probably have one foot out the door. He hadn't been back long. I didn't think Badger would give him a hard time if he picked up and left again.

"I need to talk to the club about a few things, and I think Church would be the best place. It's time they realized some of them are acting like idiots. I don't want our girls growing up with all this tension in the air. It's not good for them. This club used to be amazing when it came to our women and children. Then everything went sideways when Doolittle claimed Minnie. It's time for things to get back on track."

Ram had said as much to Badger before. Clearly, it hadn't sunk in yet since nothing had changed. We'd had Church not too long ago to discuss Ram being back and he'd dropped the bomb about Riley being his daughter. He'd mentioned the tension in the club, and how things felt off. He wasn't wrong. So far, Badger hadn't done a damn thing about it and that was weeks ago.

"We'll be fine while you handle that. I'll let them play with their new things, or we can watch some cartoons or something. I won't lie. I'm a little nervous about being alone with them, but they're my daughters. It's time to figure out how to be a mother."

I reached over and squeezed her hand. "You're going to do a great job, Marci. I have faith in you."

We ate and watched the girls play. I noticed Melly still hadn't said a word, and Nessy seemed to always know what her sister needed or wanted. What did that tell me? Her lack of speech wasn't new. I had to wonder if Melly had ever spoken a

word, and if so, how long had it been? What happened to those girls? I didn't want to ask Nesy, but since Surge hadn't given me details, I wondered if he even knew.

"Girls, why don't you take a break and eat a little?" I called out. "You can play some more before we leave."

They hurried over to the table. Marci took them to the bathroom to wash their hands, and when they came back, I had their food set up, including sauce and ketchup. They ate so quickly I almost asked when they'd last eaten, but I didn't want to call attention to it. For all I knew, it would make them self-conscious, and that was the last thing I wanted.

When they ran off to play again, I noticed the way Marci watched their every move. Until today, she'd never been able to hold them. She'd had no idea what they looked like, whether they'd been alive or not, and I knew this had to be overwhelming. It had been obvious how scared she was, but she'd taken to motherhood rather well, even if it had only been an hour. I didn't doubt for a second she'd be fine if I left the house. It wasn't like I had any experience raising toddlers. For some reason, she seemed to think I had more knowledge than her. We might have a lot of kids at the compound, but it wasn't like I went around babysitting everyone. Right now, the adults needed more supervision than the kids.

I decided to go ahead and text Badger. Better to get this out of the way. *Can you call Church in a little over an hour?*

I waited and didn't get a response. After another minute or two, I put my phone away. The fact he hadn't responded or called bothered me. Badger had always been good about answering if one of us messaged or called. Had he already found out about the girls? If so, he could very well be

pissed as fuck at me. Although, it wouldn't be the first time one of us did something without asking permission first. Badger pretended to be a hard-ass, but he really did think of the club as his family. I knew he tried to give us the things we needed, even if that meant we chose a woman he didn't necessarily like. Well, except in Doolittle's case. Poor bastard. He'd gone through hell to claim Minnie.

We let the girls play another twenty minutes, then rounded them up and put them back into the truck. On the drive home, they both fell asleep. Marci kept watching them, as if she were scared they might disappear at any moment. Since she'd lost them right after they were born, I understood her fears.

I pulled through the gates of the compound and went straight home. The girls didn't wake even when I turned off the truck. I carefully picked up Nessy while Marci got Melly out of her car seat. Carrying them inside, we eased them down onto their beds, took their little shoes off, and quietly left the room.

"I'm leaving the door open," Marci said. "They may be scared if they wake up in a strange place."

"The fact they're sleeping so well means they trust us to some extent. You know how to reach me if there's an emergency, or call one of the Prospects. I haven't received a notice about Church, so I'm going to Badger's house to talk to him." I kissed her on the forehead and left before I changed my mind. I'd have been content to lurk in the girls' doorway and watch them sleep.

I rode my bike to the President's house and stopped in his driveway. It seemed incredibly quiet. I got off and went to

the door. Before I could knock, Badger opened the door and stepped outside. I backed up and he followed until we stood in the yard. All right. Looked like pissed had been an understatement. He definitely had to know about the girls already.

“Since you didn’t respond, I wasn’t sure if you got my text,” I said.

“Got it. Not sure why you think you get to call Church.” He folded his arms. “This club is starting to have an issue with authority. Everyone wants to tell me what to do. Maybe some of you think you could do a better job?”

What. The. Fuck. “Badger, with all due respect, I’m not sure what crawled up your ass today, but kindly remove it. If it travels any farther, you might require surgery.”

He glared at me, but I wasn’t backing down. This was ridiculous. He thought the club didn’t respect his authority? More like we could all feel the tension in the air. I’d been worried for a while now that our club was coming apart at the seams. All thanks to a bunch of women.

“I wanted you to call Church for a few reasons. This would be one of them. I know I’m not the only one who’s noticed this club is fucked-up. Ever since that shit with Meredith, things haven’t been right. Demon and Savage have realized their women aren’t angels and need an attitude adjustment, except whatever they’re doing isn’t working. To my knowledge, no one has properly apologized to Meredith and invited her here. How long is everyone going to bury their heads in the fucking sand?” I asked.

“What does that have to do with Church?” he asked.

“I did something without asking. You can kick my ass for it if you want, but I’d do it again in a heartbeat. Surge and Wire have been helping me. When Marci was a captive of Vega’s men, she had three babies. One was stillborn. The two girls survived. I asked them to track down the kids.”

Badger straightened a little. “They found them?”

I nodded. “Nessy and Melly are my house now, and that’s where they’ll stay. The hackers did whatever was necessary to make those girls ours in the eyes of the law, even going so far as to forge hospital records and file an old police report about stolen infants. Which means they also married me and Marci.”

Badger sighed and scrubbed both hands over his face. “I feel like I’m getting too old for this shit. All the times Grizzly said that, I argued with him. Now I understand. I know why you did it, and I can’t even be mad about it. What does it have to do with the other situation?”

I hesitated, not wanting to go over this multiple times. It’s why I’d wanted to talk during Church. Better to say it all at once and let everyone hear at the same time. Voicing my concerns to Badger didn’t seem like it would do me any good. I knew Ram had already mentioned something. Nothing had been done since then. Of course, he’d talked about it during Church and clearly that hadn’t been enough. I wasn’t sure what it would take.

“I know things need to change,” Badger said. “Honestly, I don’t know how to make it happen. I can’t force Mariah and Farrah to act right. I can’t force Shella and Lilian to forgive Meredith and mend their relationship. It’s not the same as dealing with the men here.”

“Actually, it kind of is,” I said. “You’re the club president, Badger. Farrah and Mariah were asked to leave the Dixie Reapers because of their behavior. Give them an ultimatum. If they realize this club won’t take their shit either, and they’ll have nowhere to go, it might knock some sense into them. Besides, they aren’t going to want to be separated from their men, and you damn well know Demon and Savage won’t be going anywhere.”

“I don’t like it, but you’re right. As for Shella and Lilian, they’re family. I’ll try sitting them down, along with Slash and Dragon. Maybe we can talk through everything together, then reach out to Meredith. Adalia already talks to her sometimes. I know Minnie has spoken to her, and they’ve fixed things between them.”

“I don’t like the vibe around here these days,” I said. “It’s not good for our women, or for our kids. Hell, it’s probably unhealthy for all of us. We have enough stress in our lives without causing more.”

“Fine. I’m not calling Church, but I will talk to Savage and Demon. The three of us will come up with something to make Mariah and Farrah behave. Once things have been decided, I’ll let everyone else know what’s going on.” Badger reached out his hand and I shook it. “I appreciate you talking to me about all this. It may seem like I’m not listening, but I haven’t come up with a way to approach the situation. Like I said, some of it is personal, which makes it harder.”

“Once the girls have settled in a little bit, I’d like for them to meet everyone. For now, I’m going to keep them at home or Marci and I will take them places together. They’re only three and a half, and they haven’t had an easy life. I don’t

want them to pick up on any negativity.”

“I’ll quietly spread the word you have a family, and for everyone to give you space. I’ll also ask Ram not to say anything to Talia or Riley. Since they were with Marci, I’m not sure how they’d react.”

“Thanks, Badger.”

I got on my bike and went back home. I hadn’t exactly resolved the issue, but perhaps things would change this time. It would have to do for the moment. Right now, my girls and Marci needed my full attention.

Chapter Ten

Marci

My sweet little angels slept peacefully in their beds. I kept sniffing and wiping away tears. No matter how many times I'd dreamed of them, I'd never honestly thought I'd see them, much less get to hold them. Now, here they were. Neither had moved an inch since we placed them in their beds. Little Nussy gave a soft snort in her sleep, and I covered my mouth to stifle a giggle. *Too cute!*

The front door opened and shut, and I wondered how long I'd been staring at the girls. It seemed too soon for Stitches to be back. Did that mean things hadn't gone well? I felt the heat of his body as he came up behind me and placed a hand on my hip. I leaned into him, and glanced up, noticing he also watched the girls. The look on his face made my breath catch. Nussy and Melly might not be his biologically, but I could tell he already adored them.

It broke my heart knowing he'd never get to experience this with little Rose. He'd have been an amazing father. It seemed the girls would help heal the both of us. His hand tightened on my hip, and he tugged me back into the hallway. When he took my hand, I followed him without question. Instead of going to the living room or kitchen, he took me to the bedroom.

I sat on the edge of the bed and Stitches shut the door. He ran a hand over his head and sighed heavily. Clearly, something weighed on him. Had Badger told him the girls and

I weren't allowed to stay? Had he been furious when he'd found out about them?

"Talk to me, Adam. What's wrong?" I asked.

"Badger knows we're married, and I told him we brought the girls home. He wasn't happy about the way I did it, but after discussing some of the tension around here, he understood. He wanted to tackle it in person or try to."

"And you're worried things will go wrong somewhere along the way?" I asked.

"Something like that," he muttered. "I want this club to be safe for all of you, for you to feel welcome. I told him to give the girls time to settle into their new lives before we introduce them to everyone. He's going to put out the word they're here but ask everyone to keep their distance."

"I thought he might have said we couldn't stay."

He came closer and went down on one knee in front of me, taking my hands in his. "No, honey. You're my wife and those are my kids. This is your home, and no one is going to tell you to leave."

"Is it? I think I feel like a guest. We may be married, but we aren't a real couple. More like roommates." He frowned and I knew he hadn't liked hearing those words. Didn't make them any less true. "We went on some dates, and held hands, but have we acted like a couple in any other way? I'm not even sure you're attracted to me."

He hung his head and gave a humorless laugh. "Not attracted to you? Guess I'm a better actor than I realized."

"What's that supposed to mean?" I asked.

Before I realized what he was doing, he placed his hands on my cheeks and leaned in to kiss me. The heat of his lips against mine made my breath catch. I felt the flick of his tongue and opened, letting him in. He devoured me, searing me with his passion. I'd never felt anything like it before, and it left me dizzy.

When he drew back, I wanted to beg him to keep going. Reaching up, I touched my lips, marveling at how they tingled. I stared at Stitches, and he held my gaze. I could see the hunger blazing in his eyes and knew he wanted more. The girls could wake at any moment, and I couldn't say for certain I was completely ready, and yet... Curiosity filled me. If his kisses felt like that, what would it be like to do more?

"How long have you felt like that about me?" I asked.

"Since the end of the first week. Maybe not this strongly, but I certainly noticed you as a woman. You were broken and healing, and I had my own issues to deal with. I figured if you were ever truly ready, you'd say something. Not as a way to block out the bad memories, but because you wanted something more with me."

I swallowed the knot in my throat and noticed my hand trembled as I reached for him. "I do want that. I'm ready for us to be a real couple, Adam."

"We can talk about it more later. Right now, we need to be around in case the girls wake up. They'll be scared since they won't know where they are. After they're down for the night, then..."

He might not have finished his sentence, but he didn't need to. If I still wanted him at the end of the night, he would be mine. He kissed me again. This time, I put my arms around

his neck and toppled him to the floor, landing on top of him. I'd have never thought I'd be so bold. With Stitches, I felt like a different version of myself. A stronger, more confident one.

He rolled us so that I lay under him. Fear didn't fill me the way I'd thought it would. Even though he was a large man, I knew Stitches wouldn't hurt me. I slid my hands down over his chest and felt his heart pounding under my palms. The soft cry of a child broke us apart, and we scrambled to our feet. Rushing to the girls' room, we hurried inside and found Melly sitting up in bed with tears on her cheeks.

Stitches held back as I approached our daughter, and I sat on the floor beside her toddler bed. "Hi, Melly. Do you remember me? I'm your mommy."

She sniffled and didn't move. I glanced at Stitches, feeling completely lost as to what to do. Nesy still slept. So far, Melly had followed her lead, so without our other daughter's assistance, I wasn't sure how to calm Melly down.

Stitches came over and picked her up from the bed, cradling her against his chest. He ran his hand up and down her back and murmured something to her I couldn't quite hear. The rustle of bedding caught my attention and I saw Nesy had woken. She blinked at me a few times, then smiled.

"Mommy!"

"Did you sleep well?" She nodded and looked around the room. "Where are we?"

"This is your home, Nesy. Your dad and I fixed up this room for you. Do you like it?"

Her eyes went wide. "This is all for us?"

“Of course! And if there are any toys or clothes you don’t like, then we can get something different. Would you like to go watch a movie in the living room? It’s not quite dinnertime. Or do you want to play in your room?”

“Can we go outside?” she asked.

Stitches cleared his throat. “I need to fence the yard, and we don’t have a swing or anything right now. But I’ll get it done this week.”

Again I marveled at how smart she was, and how large her vocabulary was. When Nesy talked, it was more like we were speaking to a five- or six-year-old. I’d never been all that smart in school. As much as I hated to even consider it, I wondered if she’d inherited those genes from her sperm donor — I refused to call that monster her father.

“You have coloring books, and crayons too. We could take them to the kitchen,” I offered. “We have cookie dough. I could bake some chocolate chip cookies while you color. Do either of you like that sort of thing?”

Nesy nodded. I picked up the items I’d mentioned and held my hand out to her. She quickly got out of bed and gripped my fingers. We went to the kitchen and set the girls into the seats with boosters fastened to them. Once we’d noticed how small the clothes were, Stitches had thought they might be necessary, and he’d been right. I buckled in Nesy while Stitches handled Melly. After they were secure, I gave them each a coloring book and put the crayons on the table between them.

I wanted to interact with them more, but I took Stitches’ lead. He moved across the kitchen to stand near the stove and I joined him. In a low voice, so the children couldn’t

hear, he spoke to me.

“Something is off with the girls,” he said. “I know we’re strangers, but there’s just this... I don’t know how to put it. A wrongness?”

“I feel it too.”

“I’m going to message Surge and see if he found anything he didn’t share. Not right now, though. I’ll watch them while you bake.”

“Why are you way over here?” I asked.

“Melly only relaxes once she has some distance from us. The fact she won’t talk, and the tension in her little body whenever adults are close, makes me think she’s been abused. And Nussy is incredibly protective of her. A little too much.”

I nodded. He was right, even if I didn’t want to even consider someone might have hurt my girls. After everything I’d been through, I could understand. It was quite possible my little Nussy grew up so fast because of the hardships they had faced. For some reason she had decided to be her sister’s protector. Something must have happened to make her feel as if Melly needed a shield.

“Can you find out?” I asked. “I think you’re right. They’ve been through something awful, and I don’t think we can help them until we know exactly what we’re facing.”

“Once you have the cookies in the oven, I’ll leave the girls with you and step outside to make a call. It’s possible we’ll never know unless the girls tell us. Unless there’s video or audio evidence, I don’t see how Surge could find anything. Of course, it’s also possible they could have bragged to somebody through text messages or emails.”

I stared at him for a moment processing what he said. “Do you mean to tell me he can access all of that stuff?”

“If anything is stored on a device or drive either connected to the Internet or backed up to a cloud server, then I’m sure the hackers have a way to find it.”

That was a rather frightening thought. Did that mean they could access anything stored on a cell phone, tablet, or computer? Even family pictures? I started to ask and decided I probably didn’t want to know. In this case it would work out in our favor. But I had to admit I didn’t like the thought of someone being able to take a peek at anything on my phone whenever they felt like it. Although I wasn’t really sure how all of that worked. Maybe they could only do something like that if they were nearby. Again, it was probably information I was better off not knowing.

I finished slicing the cookie dough and shaping the cookies. Placing them on the baking sheet I checked the oven temperature before sliding them inside. Once I set the timer, Stitches gave me a quick kiss and left the kitchen. I noticed Nessy’s gaze followed him.

“He’ll be back in a minute,” I assured her. “He just had to go make a phone call.”

She went back to coloring, but I noticed she would glance toward the door every few minutes. I joined them at the table. Lightly touching the corner of Nessy’s page, I commented on the bright colors she’d used.

“You have a lot of shades of blue on the page. Is that your favorite color?” My little girl nodded her head, and I looked over at her sister’s page. Melly had chosen a coloring book about family and friends. While there was a lot of pink

and purple on the page, I noticed she had completely covered one of the adults in a thick layer of black crayon. I could no longer tell if they had been male or female. It didn't take a psychology degree to figure out that represented the person who had hurt her the most. "Melly, you seem to like pink and purple a lot. I think you'll like the new clothes we picked out for you. There are quite a few things in those colors."

Nessy continued to color and didn't look up as she spoke. "She really likes purple the best, but she uses the pink for me. I like blue because it reminds me of our brother."

It felt as if my entire body went ice cold. I stared at my little girl in complete shock. It wasn't likely anyone had told her she'd had a brother. Since the girls were both abandoned, I doubt anyone had known about their past. If they had, it would have been easier to find them. Knowing Stitches, he'd asked someone to look into it the moment I mentioned my babies. The fact it had taken until now to get them back, meant it had been a difficult task. So how did Nessy know about their stillborn brother?

"Who told you about your brother?" I asked.

"He told me," Nessy said.

I swallowed hard then clasped my hands together, hoping the girls wouldn't notice they were shaking. When she said *he*, she couldn't mean... could she?

"Are you saying that you've seen your brother?"

Nessy shrugged a shoulder. "Not exactly, but I can sometimes hear him. When I told the other adults that, it scared them. I think that's why they never bothered me."

Her statement confirmed my suspicions about Melly. It

also worried me. Could my little girl really hear her brother? What did all of this mean?

Her confession didn't scare me, not in the way it had apparently affected the other adults. However, I did worry about her. If someone had ever told her she had a brother, I could have considered the fact she talked to him is a way to cope with things. Knowing that wasn't possible only left me with one other option... my little girl wasn't what most people would consider normal. I've never believed in psychics or the ghost hunters on TV, but I might have to rethink things.

I needed to speak with Stitches. As calmly and quietly as possible, I stood and pushed in my chair. I ran my hand over Melly's hair and gave Nessy's shoulder a squeeze. "Your daddy is taking an awfully long time. I'm going to check on him and I'll be right back."

I hurried out of the kitchen and out the front door. Stitches was still on the phone leaning against a porch post. He must have noticed the panicked expression on my face because he abruptly stopped speaking and held his hand out to me. What was he going to think when I told him about the discussion I'd just had with Nessy?

Chapter Eleven

Stitches

I'd started with a call to Surge but he'd passed me off to Wire when he couldn't answer my question. He was in the middle of taking notes when Marci came out of the house. It hadn't been very long since I came outside, and yet she looked incredibly pale. What the hell could have happened in such a short amount of time? She took my hand, and I tugged her against my side, putting my arm around her waist.

"Wire, can you hold on for just a second?" I didn't even have to ask her what was wrong. The moment I took the phone away from my ear, she told me what happened.

"Do you believe in psychics?" she asked.

Now I was even more confused. Did I believe in haunted houses and that some people could see things others didn't? Sure. But the last time I checked my house wasn't haunted, so what prompted her question?

"I guess it depends on what you mean by psychic. Why do you want to know?"

"The girls have never been around anyone who knew they were triplets and not twins, but Nesy said she talks to her brother. It freaked me out a little."

I felt the vibration of my phone and realized Wire was speaking. Bringing the phone up to my ear, I caught the tail end of what he said.

"... need to speak with the..."

“I didn’t catch all of that. Who do I need to speak to and why?”

“I was saying if you believe your daughter may be psychic I think I have a contact who can help you. A rather *special* group of people.”

Was he trying to say he knew a bunch of psychics? I wasn’t going to discount there were things in this world not everyone would understand. While I didn’t see or hear spirits, I wasn’t going to say Nesy couldn’t. Still... why would Wire know a group of people like that? From what I knew of him, that didn’t seem to fit his personality.

“You think Nesy may actually be psychic?” I asked.

Wire was quiet for a moment. “Let me ask you this. Can you think of any other explanation? She’s talking to her brother, one she couldn’t have possibly known she had. If she isn’t psychic, then how else do you explain it?”

“I guess it just seems a little bit like something you would find in a book. The fantasy kind. But to answer my wife’s question, I do believe there are people who can see or hear spirits. I also think with how young our daughter is, it’s something she might grow out of.”

Marci sagged against me, and I realized I’d said the right thing. Whatever was going on, we’d figure it out and give Nesy our full support. Although I still didn’t understand why Wire had mentioned the Devoted Guardians.

“I can’t really talk about the people I mentioned without their permission. Lavender and I made a promise. However, that doesn’t mean I can’t make a phone call and see if they’d be willing to help,” Wire said.

“There’s no rush. I don’t personally know anyone like Nussy, so I’m not sure what exactly she’ll need from us. As she gets older things will probably be more difficult for her. She’ll either have to hide her ability, or deal with the way people treat her.”

I hugged Marci and sent her back into the house. If she was out here for too long the girls might start to worry. I talked to Wire for a few more minutes before ending the call and going inside. I hoped I’d given him enough for him to find out what happened to Melly. It was clear she had been abused. The question was to what extent. Without knowing more details, I wasn’t sure of the best way to help her.

Since she was nonverbal, it would probably be difficult for a therapist to help her. Then again, I didn’t know much about the field of psychology. Perhaps they could learn enough merely from observing her behaviors. I’d have to discuss it more with Marci. After what had happened with the last therapist, I wasn’t sure I wanted to invite another one into the house.

When I reached the kitchen Marci had already taken the cookies from the oven. It amazed me they hadn’t burned, but they seemed to be fine. The girls had both stopped coloring and watched her every move. The way they stared with wide eyes made me wonder how frequently they’d been allowed to have such a treat. I was a little worried they may have never had a cookie. If I found out they’d been deprived of something so simple, I was going to seriously lose my shit.

I took down two of the sippy cups we purchased and filled them with milk. Marci put two cookies on a plate to cool. If they weren’t on the larger side, I would have had her

give each of them two, but one was probably more than sufficient. Even though I could tell both girls were anxious to get their cookies, neither one of them whined or begged. Marcy lightly touched the cookies a few times, and once they were sufficiently cooled, she carried them over to the table. I took the girls each their glass of milk before sitting in one of the empty chairs.

“These are for us?” Nussy asked.

“Of course they are,” I said. “And there’s plenty more so you can have some later. Do either of you have any favorite type of cookie?”

The girls shared a look and both of them shook their heads. Instead of gobbling the treats like most kids their age, they each took their time. The difference in the way they acted compared to other small children broke my heart. No three-year-old should ever feel they had to be this cautious about everything. I’d have much preferred to get on to them for eating too fast or taking something that hadn’t been offered than to see the way they hesitated over every little thing.

I heard a sniffle from Marci and noticed she quickly looked away. How long would it take before our girls would act like the other children here at the compound? Nussy had asked about playing outside. As much as I would love to spend every second with my new daughters, I knew I needed to give them a safe place to be out back. And quickly stood and went to one of the kitchen drawers to take out the tape measure.

“I’ll be out back for a few minutes. Need to measure for the new fence.”

Once I got outside, I called one of the Prospects. Van answered right away.

“Did you need something, Stitches?”

“Come to my house and meet me out back. I need help measuring something, then I’ll have an errand for you to run. It’s going to require the use of a club truck unless you want to use your own.”

“I’ll be there in just a minute.” Before the call ended, I heard the jingle of his keys.

Out of our current Prospects, I felt Van was the most dependable. He’d always done anything I asked and finished his tasks quickly. I didn’t know how much longer Badger would make him wait, but I thought he would make a nice addition to the club. Van, Tal, and Garrick had all become Prospects about seven years ago. The fact they remained here showed how much they wanted to be patched members of the Devil’s Fury. Maybe Badger was waiting until we had more Prospects. I only hoped he didn’t make them wait so long they decided to leave. Seven years was already far too long.

Since I’d already pissed him off more than once over the last several weeks, I decided it wouldn’t hurt to poke the bear one more time. I shot off a text. *Isn’t it way past time to patch in Van, Tal, and Garrick? Or at least tell them why they haven’t been?*

I saw he read the message, but he didn’t respond. I hoped I’d give him something to consider. The men had more than proven themselves. If he worried we wouldn’t have anyone to guard the gate or do the shit jobs around here, then he could assign us a rotation or actively look for more Prospects. Personally, I was fine with our club being the size it was. I didn’t see the point in adding more members after those three.

Of course, new blood was nice with so many of us getting older. Blade, Steel, and a few others weren't doing as much these days as they had previously. They were over sixty now. Hell, I wasn't getting any younger either, and quite a few of our members were pushing fifty. Van, Tal, and Garrick would be our youngest members, and all three weren't too far off from being thirty. It wouldn't hurt to gain some young Prospects once every ten years just to make sure the Devil's Fury continued on even after the rest of us had passed on to the next life, like Grizzly had not too long ago.

I heard the crunch of boots on grass and saw Van coming around the side of the house. I held up the tape measure when he got closer. "I need to measure off a fence line."

He cleared his throat and held up some brightly colored metal rods. "Badger might have mentioned you have kids now. Since you said I was meeting you back here, it occurred to me you might need a place for them to play. We can mark it off with these as we measure."

"Good idea. Thanks, Van."

He gave me a nod and took one end of the measuring tape. With each side, he made notes in his phone. Yeah, we definitely needed to patch him in. He'd more than earned it. By the time we'd finished, I was already getting ideas for what to do back here for the girls.

"Since I don't have to worry about them being snatched out of the yard, I think chain link will be fine. I just don't want them to easily wander off or walk into the road."

"It's supposed to be a surprise, but the club is pitching in to get the girls something. I don't think they counted on you

doing something like this quite so soon.”

I rubbed the back of my neck. “Nessy wanted to play outside. I don’t have anything for them and didn’t like the idea of them being back here without a fence. Even if we’re out here with them, it would only take a second for one or both of them to dart into the road.”

Van nodded. “I get it. I have no idea what the fencing materials will cost. Am I using the club account and you’ll pay it back? Or how do you want to do this?”

“Let me get a rough idea of the cost and I’ll give you cash. I have one more thing to ask of you while you’re out.”

“Get something for the girls to have back here?” he asked.

“Yeah. I was thinking of either a swing set or a sandbox. Although, while the weather is still warm, they might like one of those little wading pools.” I opened the app on my phone for the hardware store and guesstimated the cost of the chain link and posts, plus the gate. They also carried swing sets, so I added in the cost for one of those. I sent Van around to the front of the house and went back inside. No one knew I kept a safe hidden under the floor of my closet. It wasn’t that I didn’t trust banks, but I didn’t like the idea of them having access to all my money either. It never hurt to keep some at home. I took out two thousand, knowing the fencing materials and gate would be well over one thousand dollars. I trusted Van to give the change back to me.

I carried the wad of cash outside and handed it to him. “Get everything we need for the fence and gate, then see what you can get the girls out of what’s left. Since you’re using your own truck, make sure you get gas with the money too.”

Van left and I went inside to find Marci and the girls watching an animated movie. I settled onto the couch beside them, stretching my arm along the back. Marci's hair was just within reach, and I twirled a lock around my fingers. I saw her eyes cut toward me, and a slight smile curved her lips before she focused on the movie again. As much as I enjoyed family time right now, I also couldn't wait for the girls to go to bed for the night. Once they did, I'd find out if Marci was really ready to take things to the next level.

Ever since she'd tackled me to the floor earlier, I'd been more than ready to pick up where we left off. I felt my cock start to harden at the memory of her lips on mine, and knew I needed to excuse myself for a moment before anyone noticed.

"I'm going to grab some drinks for us," I said, making a quick exit.

I stood at the kitchen counter, trying to get myself under control again. Until I felt the warmth of Marci's body pressing against my back. If I'd thought I was hard before, it was nothing compared to now. I winced as my cock pressed against my zipper.

"Honey, you're not helping right now."

She wrapped her arms around me, then slid her hand down below my belt. When she ran her palm along the hard length of my dick, I nearly grabbed her and ran to the bedroom. The woman was playing with fucking fire, and we were both about to get burned.

"I'll take something to the girls. You can bring our drinks when you're ready," she said, releasing me.

“Fucking tease,” I muttered.

I felt her body shaking and knew she was laughing at me. Later it would be my turn to torment *her*. We’d see how funny she found it then.

“Sorry,” she said. “I couldn’t help myself. Especially since I knew you wouldn’t do anything to hurt me.”

Her words sobered me, and I turned to face her. “Of course I wouldn’t. You could be in the middle of a blow job, decide you didn’t want to finish, and I still wouldn’t do anything to you. I’d be frustrated as fuck, though.”

She went up on her tiptoes and I met her partway. Her lips pressed to mine and I held her to me. Until today, I’d worried she may never be comfortable enough around me for this sort of thing. Now she kissed me of her own free will and touched me without any hesitation. She’d come such a long way from the terrified woman who’d arrived at the compound with Ram.

“I’m going to run to the bathroom for a minute, then I’ll get our drinks.”

She gave me a knowing look before she got two juice boxes for the girls and went back to the living room. I went straight to our room, shut the door, then went into the bathroom and closed that one too. Unfastening my pants, I grabbed the lube on the counter and slicked my palm before gripping my cock. I stood over the sink and used long, slow strokes. Shutting my eyes, I imagined Marci in here with me, her breasts bare, and her eyes dark with passion.

I swiped my thumb over the head of my cock, wishing it was her tongue. My dick jerked in my hand, and I quickened

my strokes. Three more pumps and I was coming. It splattered across the mirror more than it managed go into the sink. Grabbing a wad of toilet paper, I cleaned myself off, washed my hands and put my dick away. Then I cleaned off the mirror.

It wasn't nearly as good as sex with Marci would be, but at least it had taken the edge off. I washed my hands a second time, then went to get drinks before joining my family again. Marci smirked at me when I sat down, and I promised myself I'd have her begging me later.

By the time the movie went off, Van had returned and he'd brought Tal with him. I noticed a few of my brothers walking over as well. I stepped outside to greet them, only to be shooed back into my own damn house.

"We've got this," Dingo said. "We'll get the posts in the ground tonight, and the rest can go up either late tomorrow or day after. Van said he got the quick set, so by tomorrow it should be sufficiently hard."

I groaned. "Don't say that word right now."

He snickered. "Yeah. Welcome to fatherhood. On the upside, I bet they're cute little cockblockers."

I flipped him off and went back inside. Asshole. I could still hear his laughter after I shut the door. Although, he wasn't wrong. My girls *were* damn cute... and they had definitely cockblocked me earlier.

Shit. I hoped this wasn't going to be a trend.

Chapter Twelve

Marci

The first day with our girls had been interesting, and a bit tiring. I'd been so worried I'd screw up, or that the girls would be scared. We still hadn't found out what happened with Melly, but at least I knew they were safe, down the hall in their room. I put the last of the dishes into the dishwasher and started the machine. All I had left to do was wipe down the counters and stove, then I could head to the bedroom. Stitches had mentioned something about taking a shower, and I knew I wouldn't mind having one tonight either.

I double-checked everything before I shut off the kitchen light. I knew Stitches usually didn't bother locking the doors, but since we had the girls now, I took the time to make sure both doors were secure. By the time I got to the bedroom, steam billowed out of the bathroom. It made me wonder if he'd set the water temperature to the same heat level as lava. Shaking my head, I decided to be brave and grab the bull by the horns. Or in this case, Stitches by his cock.

It only took me a minute to undress, and I went into the bathroom. He hadn't noticed my presence — or was doing a damn good job of ignoring me. I opened the shower door and stepped inside. I knew the moment he realized I was there. His entire body tensed, and he slowly looked at me over his shoulder.

“This is certainly not what I expected,” he said, turning to face me. He folded his arms and lifted his chin slightly.

Despite my nerves, I took the time to look my fill. It was the first time I'd even been tempted to check out a naked man. Until now, it would have terrified me. With Stitches, I knew he'd never hurt me. Not intentionally.

“I'll admit I'm a little nervous. I've never...”

He nodded. “I know. It's why I said we'd take things as slow as you wanted. I'll never push for more than you're willing to give, Marci. Even now, you can turn around and leave. I won't stop you.”

“No. I'm where I need to be.”

“Need or want?” he asked.

“Both. I don't want to live in fear of what happened to me. You showed me earlier how much I'd enjoy being with you. If kissing you felt that amazing, I can only imagine how the rest will be. I'm ready to move on, Adam, and I think this is the step I need to take. But more importantly, I need this in order to feel like I'm really your wife.”

“All right. I'm going to let you set the pace, at least to start. If I do anything that startles you, or if you want to stop, you have to let me know. I may not pick up on the signs unless you're blatantly obvious about it.”

I moved closer and placed my hand on his arm, giving it a tug. He dropped them to his sides, and I explored his chest with my fingertips. To me he seemed larger than life, but I knew compared to some of the men at this club he was of an average size. They all seemed to be in good shape, some more so than others.

I moved my hand lower, feeling the tautness of his abdomen, then going lower still. I wrapped my fingers around

his cock, and it felt like my heart might explode. In the kitchen, the mood had been playful and I'd reacted without much thought. This time it was different. I knew where things were going.

“See? Just another part of the body. Nothing scary about it,” he murmured. Stitches placed his hand over mine and guided me in stroking him.

“I'm fine,” I said.

“Then why are you trembling?” he asked.

Was I? I hadn't even noticed. Now that he'd brought it to my attention, he was right. There was a slight tremor in my hand. It didn't mean I wanted to stop. I'd told him I wanted to erase all the bad memories, and I knew where I needed to start. Holding his gaze, I lowered myself to my knees at his feet. I licked my lips before taking his cock into my mouth, my tongue teasing the underside.

Stitches groaned and tipped his head back for a moment before focusing on me again. “That feels fucking amazing.”

I started to tell him it should, since I'd been taught well, but I refused to ruin this moment. I pushed the thoughts aside. Wrapping my hand around the base of his shaft, I used both my hand and my mouth to tease and torment him. He held completely still, not even reaching out to touch me. I could feel his gaze on me and glanced up at him several times. The tightness of his jaw told me what it cost him to hold back, but he was doing it for me.

He swelled in my mouth, and I knew he was close to coming. Did he want to? If he did, I'd swallow every drop of

his cum. I sucked harder, flicked my tongue faster. Right when I thought he might fill my mouth, he reached down to pull me to my feet.

“My turn,” he said.

He slowly backed me to the wall and used his body to hold me in place. My breasts pressed against him, and I felt his cock trapped between us, still hard and ready for more. He stared down at me, not making another move. I didn't know what he was thinking or feeling. I waited, patiently. What would he do next?

“Adam, I'm ready. I'm not going to ask you to stop. You don't have to hold back.”

He smirked. “Yeah, I do. If I don't...”

My sweet husband worried he'd make me remember those other men. I knew it without even having to ask. But I trusted him. Not only with my life, but with my children. There was no other man in this world I'd ever believe in as much as I did him.

“I'm telling you I'll be okay, Adam. I know I'm here with you. The monsters can't get me anymore.”

He lowered his head and kissed me, soft and slow. It felt as if his cock pulsed between us and I pressed closer to him. I didn't just want him, I needed him. He was the only man I'd ever desired.

Stitches backed away and reached for the soap. He gently washed me, then helped me rinse off. I wasn't sure what he planned to do next, but it surprised me when he shut off the water.

“I refuse for our first time together to be in the shower. You deserve a bed at the very least.”

I tensed and my heart began to race, but not in a good way. When I'd been prostituted, they'd tied me to a bed, or drugged me and tossed me onto a filthy mattress. That was one hurdle I wasn't sure I wanted to try jumping the very first time.

“Not the bed. Please, Adam. Anywhere but there.”

His brow furrowed. “Can you tell me why?”

I explained in as few words as possible, and saw the muscle in his jaw jump. He gave a quick nod, but instead of turning the water back on like I'd thought he would, he guided me over to the bathroom counter.

He stood behind me, and I looked at our reflection in the mirror. Not only feeling his hands slide down my arms, but seeing it, settled my nerves once more. Yes, this was better. Knowing he was the one touching me, and being able to see it, helped a tremendous amount. Maybe I wasn't quite as ready as I'd thought. It didn't mean I was backing down now. If we put it off, it wouldn't make things any less scary for me.

Stitches' hands moved from my arms to my abdomen. He inched them upward until he cupped my breasts. My breath caught as he rubbed his palms over my nipples in a circular motion. The tips hardened and my clit began to pulse with need. Was this what it felt like to be turned on?

“You're beautiful, Marci, and every inch of you is mine. My sweet, sexy, stubborn, strong wife. I can't wait to see the face you make when I'm inside you. Are you wet for me?”

I moaned and nodded, even though I wasn't certain. I shifted a little, parting my thighs a small amount. My gaze remained on the mirror, on *us*. He rolled one of my nipples between his fingers while he eased his other hand down my body and between my legs. He cupped my pussy, grinding the heel of his hand against my clit.

“Have you ever had an orgasm?” he asked. “Ever felt pleasure so intense you nearly passed out from it?”

“No, but I want to. Show me, Adam. Please. I want you to be the first man to make me come. The *only* man.”

He growled softly and eased a finger inside me. I felt him rub a spot inside me that felt both strange and amazing at the same time. He pressed tighter against my clit, grinding his hand against it. I gasped and my legs trembled. I could feel something building, a need I'd never had before.

“Adam, I... I...”

“You going to come for me?” he asked.

“I think so.” If I'd never had an orgasm before, how would I know if I was going to have one now? He pinched my nipple and gave it a sharp tug. My eyes went wide, and I felt a rush of pleasure. He added a second finger inside me, pumping them in and out. I didn't know where to look. His face. The hand on my breast. The one between my legs. I tried to take everything in at once.

“That's it. Give in, Marci. Just let go.”

I gasped and let out a little cry as I experienced what had to be an orgasm. It left me breathless, and my legs felt like jelly.

“Hold onto the counter, beautiful. I’m not sure I can be gentle.”

I braced my hands and felt the head of his cock press against me. He eased inside me, taking his time. Despite his words, he wasn’t the least bit rough. I kept my gaze locked on his at first.

Stitches pulled nearly all the way out, then thrust in hard and fast. My toes curled and I wanted to beg him for more.

“Jesus. I love watching as I fuck you.” I didn’t understand what he meant until I realized he was looking down at where we were joined. My cheeks flushed pink and I unintentionally squeezed his cock with my inner muscles. He groaned and gripped my hips. “I wanted to make you come multiple times, but I can’t wait. I’ll make it up to you.”

I didn’t know what he meant until he started pounding into me. Without the mirror, I might have been terrified right now, but I could see Stitches behind me, and knew I was safe. I let the feelings take over and was once more swept away on a tidal wave of pleasure. As the heat of his release filled me, I cried out his name, coming again.

His cock twitched inside me, and I noticed he hadn’t softened. The way he stared down at his cock made me wonder if this wasn’t the norm for him. Then he flashed me a wicked grin, pulled out, and quickly spun me around. Stitches lifted me onto the counter and before I could ask what he was doing, he was inside me again.

“You have no idea all the filthy things I want to do to you,” he said.

“What’s stopping you?”

He paused, his cock inside me. He leaned in closer, and I stared up at him.

“You aren’t ready yet, Marci. When you are, then I won’t hold back. You thought you were ready, but the thought of doing this on the bed freaked you out. How would you react if I were to pin you face down on the mattress and fuck you like a rabid beast?”

His words gave me pause. Was that something he wanted to do? Or was it just a *what if* scenario? I squeezed his cock and he grinned at me, getting the message. Bracing myself with my hands, I gave myself over to him. Stitches fucked me, filling me with cum multiple times, until we both needed a break. He hadn’t used protection, and even though we had Nussy and Melly, I could admit I wouldn’t mind having more children. Had he intentionally tried to get me pregnant?

Stitches cleaned us both up in the shower, then carried me to the bed. I wouldn’t have minded sleeping naked in his arms, but with the girls down the hall, it was better if we were dressed. He brought a nightgown over to me, and I slipped it on while he put on a pair of basketball shorts.

“Get some sleep. The girls may get up early.” He kissed my forehead. “You all right? Not too sore?”

“I’m a little tender.” Mostly because it had been a while since I’d been with anyone. I wouldn’t say that to Stitches, though. I knew it would only upset him.

This was a new beginning for me. I had a husband, children, and a home to call my own. Never again would

anyone force themselves on me. I didn't have to sleep with men for money. For the first time since I was thirteen, I felt like I belonged somewhere. And it was right beside Stitches.

I love you. The words weren't ones I needed to voice, but in my mind I told him over and over again. Maybe I'd always been in love with him. One day I'd be brave enough to tell him... just not today.

Chapter Thirteen

Stitches

It had been three weeks since the girls had come to live with us, and three weeks of getting to make love with my wife every night. And yeah, I used that phrase and meant it. With Marci, it was more than just fucking. She meant something to me. We hadn't used protection, or even discussed it. I knew we already had a lot on our plates, but it was a little late to worry about it now. If the fates wanted us to have another kid, then we would.

I still hadn't heard back from Wire about what happened to Melly, and our little one refused to speak. As to Nesy and her discussions with her brother, the people Wire had mentioned wouldn't lend their assistance. They had, however, given Wire the name of a psychic who might be able to help. I hadn't called her yet, but I would soon. Today, most likely. I knew Marci wanted answers.

Nesy giggled in the backyard and I peered out. My club had really come through for us. Not only had they put up the fence and gate, but they'd pitched in on a wooden clubhouse with a slide and two swings. Van had also found a sandbox that sat up off the ground, had a sunshade over it, and a cover so bugs wouldn't get into it when the girls weren't playing. I'd bought a table with an umbrella and four chairs so Marci would be able to sit in the shade, and she'd have a place to visit with the other wives and old ladies.

Today was the first test. Since Melly didn't speak and

shied away from strangers, we'd decided against a big club event. Instead, I'd invited over Doolittle and Minnie, as well as their triplets. I'd asked Marci first, not wanting her to be hurt. If her little boy hadn't been stillborn, we'd have three living triplets ourselves. She'd insisted she'd be fine. If it looked like she might fall apart, I'd pull her aside and discreetly get Doolittle to take his kids home.

An SUV pulled up out front and I opened the door. Doolittle gave me a wave before opening the back door and helping Minnie get the kids out. No, not Minnie. He'd said she preferred Marina, a name she'd received from her grandfather after marrying Doolittle. Clearly, my club either hadn't fully adjusted to the change, even though it had been roughly seven years, or it was another thing they needed to fix. I'd heard one of the women refer to her as a club whore. If Doolittle heard that crap, I had a feeling he'd have lost his shit.

"Marci and the girls are out back," I said as the family approached. Two girls and a boy, just like ours. "If I give you a signal of some sort, it means I need you to make a quiet yet quick exit."

Doolittle's brow furrowed. "Why?"

"Melly and Nussy aren't twins. They're triplets." I let them absorb the information for a moment. Marina gave a slight nod, sympathy lighting her eyes. Yeah, she got it. Doolittle clapped me on the shoulder. I heard a faint noise and narrowed my gaze at him. "What the hell did you bring to my house?"

He smirked. "The girls are going to love it."

"Fucking hell," I muttered. "I invited the five of you. Not something furry. And why the fuck did I hear it squeal?"

Marina cleared her throat and held out a box with holes in it. “The habitat is in the back of the SUV. Why don’t you and Doolittle get it set up and put this little one in there? I’ll go speak with Marci and let the kids play. It will be a nice surprise for the girls when they come inside.”

I wanted to argue but had a feeling it was a losing battle. Doolittle didn’t give animals to just anyone. If he’d brought it here it meant either the creature sorely needed a loving home, or he thought my girls could benefit from it in some way. Fine. What was one more thing to take care of?

“What is it?” I asked once Marina and the kids had gone out back.

“Guinea pig,” he said. “An Abyssinian, which means its hair sticks up everywhere. This one is a year old, so you’ll have it at least four more years. Her name is Custard because she’s a yellowish beige color.”

“And where did Custard come from?” I asked.

“Single mom bought it for her daughter, except the daughter...” He sighed. “She was killed in a hit and run last month. The mom couldn’t handle taking care of the little guinea pig anymore because it was too painful. Custard has been a regular customer at my clinic, so I know she’s in good health and has a great temperament.”

“Damn. I feel awful for that woman. I can’t imagine losing either or both of the girls like that.”

Doolittle looked away for a moment. “Except you do know what she’s going through, don’t you? I heard about your daughter. I wish you’d told us.”

Great. Talking about Rose wasn’t as painful as it had

been even a few weeks ago, but I still wasn't ready to share her with everyone. Doolittle, however, was right here and making an effort. I motioned for him to follow me, and I pointed to the picture of her footprints on the wall.

“The nurse at the hospital made that for me. Rose would have been ten this year. Marci was her aunt.”

“Well, fuck. Badger left that part out, only said the two of you knew each other back when she was a kid. So she was your girlfriend's baby sister?” he asked.

“Yeah. They had quite an age gap between them, and there was an older brother. Turned out he was a bigger asshole than I realized. He's the reason Ram found Marci with the others. The fucker sold her.” Every time I thought about it, I wanted to rip Richard to pieces. If he ever turned up alive somewhere, he was mine!

“Come on. Let's get Custard set up before she pees in that box. I'm sure she's a little nervous right now.”

Doolittle led the way back out to his SUV and he popped the back hatch. I took out what had to be the biggest cage I'd ever seen. The damn thing was at least four feet long and three feet deep.

“I had it custom-made when Custard joined us. Her previous home is being turned into a keepsake for the girl's mom, whenever she's ready for it. I had an artist use the wire to make a heart, and he's going to use a picture I sent of Custard and the little girl, encase it in resin, then place it inside the heart.”

“You think the mom will want it?” I asked.

“Someday. They had a family dog as well, which she

kept, so I'll see her from time to time. When she asks about Custard, I'll have that piece ready and give it to her then."

"Let's go figure out where we're putting this monstrosity," I said.

"Don't you have a third room you aren't using right now?" he asked.

"Yeah, but eventually the girls may want their own space. Or we might have another kid."

Doolittle shrugged. "Think you're going to need it in the next four to seven years? If not, we can put Custard in there. If you put a baby gate across the door, you could train her to run free in the room and return to her cage to use the bathroom. They're pretty smart animals."

"Fine. Spare room it is. But if Marci bitches about cleaning a guinea pig cage, I'm telling her to call you to complain about it."

He snickered and I knew it wouldn't bother him in the slightest. We carried the cage into the house and set it up, then added the bedding, bowls, water bottle, and toys. Once everything was ready, Doolittle picked up Custard from the box and placed her into the cage. She immediately squealed and ran a few laps before settling down.

"Guinea pigs make various sounds, and each one means something. I can either give you a quick rundown, or you can figure it out on your own," Doolittle said. "Also, in addition to the pellets, hay, and treats I've provided, she needs fresh fruits and veggies. I printed off a list for you and put it in the box with her food. She'll take a treat from the girls' hands, and she won't nip them. It will be a good bonding experience

for them.”

“It’s a small rodent. Exactly how much noise does it make?” I asked.

“You heard the higher pitched squeal right now. That’s the noisiest she’ll get, and I’ve found Custard typically won’t make that sound unless she wants attention. She was probably hoping she’d get held after being in the box.”

“So it likes being petted like a cat or dog?” I asked.

“Kind of. Custard used to watch TV with her previous little girl. Or rather, she’d sit on the couch with her. The toys in her cage will help keep her teeth trimmed, as well as provide entertainment for her when she’s alone. I’ll send a video clip to you later explaining the different sounds she’ll make. Then you can teach your girls.”

“Is Custard here because she needs us, or because you think we need her?” I asked.

“You’re learning.” Doolittle leaned a shoulder against the wall and watched the little guinea pig. “A bit of both. I’d be happy to keep her indefinitely, but then she’d be taking up space for an animal who may have a hard time getting a home. As to the other part, I know Melly doesn’t speak and it’s most likely due to trauma. Handling Custard may not help her, but what if it does? They have pet therapy for a reason.”

“After the counselor who came to speak with Marci, I’m not sure I want to go that route again,” I said. “Maybe an animal therapist is the way to go. Shall we call her Dr. Custard?”

Doolittle shook his head at me. “You’re not right.”

“I’m aware. Then again, there’s not a damn person in this club who isn’t fucked up in one way or another.”

“As much as I would love to disagree with you, I can’t. Should we check on the women and kids?”

I nodded and we headed for the backyard. Marina and Marci both sat the table while the kids played. I noticed their triplets were being extra careful with our girls. Mikhaila and Oksana were in the clubhouse with Nesity, while Nikolay gently pushed Melly on the swing. I watched as he spoke to her, in a tone so low I couldn’t hear him, and seemed to put the little one at ease.

Marci noticed the direction of my gaze and smiled. “I worried she’d be scared of him. Instead, she went to him without any hesitation. It was sweet.”

Marina elbowed her. “I’ll remind you of that in about twelve years.”

“What’s in twelve years?” I asked.

“That’s when your girls will want to start going on dates,” Marina said with a grin.

I glared at her and Doolittle, but he only shrugged. Great. They weren’t even four, and now I was worried about some boy coming along and stealing them from me. Melly gave Nikolay a soft smile, and I realized right then and there, if that boy ever came to me and asked if he could date her, I’d have no choice but to say yes... because he was the first one to bring her joy since she’d arrived here. Fuck.

“You better raise that boy right,” I muttered.

“Isn’t it too soon to pair them off?” Marci asked.

“They’re three and six.”

“Technically, our kids are seven now,” Marina said. “They had a birthday last week, so they’re three and a half years older than your kids.”

“Which means you don’t have to worry about Nikolay stealing either of them,” Doolittle said.

“Why’s that?” Marci looked from the kids to each of us. “I’m confused.”

Marina rolled her eyes. “Every man in this club has fallen for a younger woman, and I don’t mean by a few years. Most are at least ten years apart. Now, if you were to have a daughter in the next year or three? Then you can worry.”

“Unless Gunner, Ronan, or Luis falls for them,” Doolittle said. I flipped him off and the bastard only laughed. We’d see how funny he found it when it was *his* daughters pairing off with someone.

“I think this was good for them,” Marci said. “Are all the other kids a lot older than our girls?”

“Most are nine and up,” Marina said. “Although Wolf and Glory have a son. Jasper. He’s about the age of our triplets. Their daughter, Sienna, is a little older than him but she’s developmentally delayed. She’s such a sweetheart.”

“Their son doesn’t play with Nikolay?” I asked.

“He sticks pretty close to Sienna. I think he’s afraid she’ll feel left out, although she’s welcome to come over too. The girls would love to play with her.” Marina waved a hand. “I’m afraid I haven’t called to ask, and Nikolay has never mentioned it. It’s a good idea, though.”

We talked a while longer, and when I noticed the girls were getting tired, I suggested everyone go inside and watch a movie. I made a pallet on the floor. Nesy immediately stretched out, with Oksana and Mikhaila right beside her. Melly hovered near Nikolay. He sat down and patted the spot beside him. Melly lay on her side with her head near his leg, and I watched as he ran his fingers through her hair.

Doolittle leaned in closer to whisper to me. “He does that for his sisters. Puts them to sleep every time.”

He was right. Within a few minutes, Melly was completely out, and Nesy didn’t look to be too far behind her. Doolittle’s kids were still wide awake, and once the movie ended, the family headed home. Our girls hadn’t had a chance to meet our newest family member yet, so I took a moment to introduce Marci first.

“Your new best friend brought a gift,” I said.

“Where? Why didn’t she say anything?” Marci asked.

I led her to the spare room and the moment she saw the cage, her jaw dropped. “Are you kidding me? They brought a live animal?”

“Did you miss the part where I said his name was Doolittle? He’s a vet. Has a practice in town.” I told her the story Doolittle shared about Custard, and by the time I’d finished, Marci looked like she might cry.

She crept closer to the cage and knelt down. Custard ran over to her, squeaking. I pointed out the treats and Marci fed her one through the bars of the cage. Well, if the girls didn’t like her, it seemed my wife did. I sat down nearby and leaned against the wall. Marci opened the cage and took out

the guinea pig, holding it against her chest and petting it.

“She’s so sweet,” she said.

“And this is the other reason they brought the guinea pig. They knew we’d fall in love with it and give it a good home. Or rather, they thought the girls would. I hadn’t counted on you trying to steal our children’s pet from them.”

She stuck her tongue out at me, and I growled softly, narrowing my eyes at her. “Keep it up and I’ll remind you of other uses for that tongue.”

“Later.” She kissed the little pig on the head. “Once the girls are down for the night, you can do all the wicked things to me. Don’t think I didn’t see the bag in the closet. You went shopping and didn’t tell me.”

Yeah, I had. She’d never used toys before, and I decided to let her experiment a little. Besides, the thought of watching her get off made me hard as fuck. Too bad the girls never napped for more than two hours, otherwise I’d haul her off to our room right now.

Tonight wouldn’t come soon enough.

Chapter Fourteen

Marci

Several Days Later

I shouldn't have followed him. He'd told me to stay put with the girls, and he'd be back in the morning. So why didn't I listen? Instead, I'd asked Marina to watch the girls, and I'd snuck out. How the hell Stitches didn't realize I was following him was anyone's guess. I'd never done something like this before.

He still hadn't bought an SUV, like he'd talked about, so I was driving the club truck. I hoped Badger wouldn't be too angry about it. He'd given permission for me to drive it around the compound, but this was definitely different.

Stitches came to a stop at a nicer home in the next town. It wasn't until he approached the door I realized where we were. A brothel. My skin crawled as the man answered the door, took money from Stitches, then let him inside. I knew he wasn't the type to purchase a woman for an hour. There had to be a reason he wanted into this place. But what was it?

Everything in the house went dark within fifteen minutes. Three girls had already run out, barely clothed. I'd known then something was going on and Stitches had a reason for being here. My stomach churned at the implication. Stitches came outside, keeping his gaze on the ground, but I noticed he was heading right for me. I tried to scrunch down in my seat. A tap on the window forced me to meet his gaze.

“Why the hell are you here and who is with the girls?” he asked after I rolled down the window.

I started to answer and noticed something shiny on his cut, as well as a coppery scent. Wait. “Is that blood?”

“It’s not mine.”

And that made it okay? Then again, if he’d hurt the men using those girls, I couldn’t say I was going to lose sleep over it.

“Marina is watching them,” I said. “And no, Doolittle doesn’t know why so don’t get her into trouble.”

“Again, I ask, why are you here?”

He’d never used that tone with me before. I swallowed hard and wondered how badly I’d fucked up by coming here. He’d been acting suspicious, and not once had he ever left without telling me where he was going or why he was leaving. It had been so out of character I hadn’t been able to let it go.

“You were being incredibly vague. It worried me,” I said.

He leaned into the truck, his face coming close to mine. “You want to know why I’m here? Are you sure you can handle it?”

“You didn’t pay to use those girls,” I said. “You set them free.”

“You’re right. I did. They aren’t the reason I’m here. Getting them away from the assholes inside was just an added bonus. This blood on me belongs to the men who kidnapped them.”

He’d just admitted to hurting, and possibly killing,

people. It should have bothered me. A moral, upright person might have had an issue with it, or at least one who hadn't suffered at the hands of men like those. All I felt was relief they wouldn't be able to hurt anyone else.

“You want to come inside?” he asked.

There was something sinister about him tonight. I'd never seen this side of him before, and I wasn't sure what to make of it. If I wanted to know what he was up to, then I needed to go with him. It wasn't like he was going to hurt me. I got out of the truck and locked the door before going with him into the house.

He stepped over a dead body, and I skirted around it. I recognized him as the man who'd opened the door for him earlier. I saw two more as we went deeper into the house. Stitches led the way to a bedroom at the back, and my breath caught when I saw who was in the room.

Wayne Gray sat tied to a chair, stripped naked. Stitches had blackened the man's eye, and blood dripped from his mouth. My entire body shook as I stared at him. How long had it been since I'd last seen him? I still remembered it as if it were yesterday. The pain and humiliation, the awful things he'd said to me.

“This is why I didn't tell you where I was going. He's the only one within reach right now. One of the others lives in a different state but isn't too far away. The other is way out in California. I'll find ways to make them pay for what they did.” He turned his gaze on Wayne. “Do you remember her? Little Marci, all grown up.”

Wayne grinned, leering at me. “I remember. She was such a sweet, soft little thing. Best screams I've ever heard.”

“The more you speak, the more pain I plan to give you.”

Wayne snorted. “Hell, my dick is getting hard just remembering the way I’d bend her over, hold her down, and shove my dick into her. That little whore took it in all her holes, all night long.”

I backed up until I hit the wall. The man continued to spill all the filthy things he’d done to me, the way he and his friends had used me. Stitches’ hands were fisted at his sides, and I noticed the way his body shook. He looked like he was going to lose it at any moment. Wayne kept talking and talking. The more detailed his recounting became, the more I wanted to throw up or run away. Maybe both.

“Look away, Marci.” Stitches approached Wayne. He gripped a knife in his hand, and I didn’t even know where he’d gotten it. “He touched you with his filthy hands. Put his fingers inside you.”

My eyes went wide as Wayne screamed. Stitches swiftly removed the man’s fingers one at a time. He’d told me not to watch, yet I couldn’t seem to help myself. The sweet man who held me, comforted me, and gave me pleasure every night had turned into a complete savage. He tortured Wayne, removed more body parts, yet somehow managed to keep him alive.

I didn’t know how long we were in that room, but by the time we left, there wasn’t much remaining of Wayne except an awful lot of blood on the floor. Stitches’ chest heaved and his eyes were wild. If anyone had ever told me he had this darkness inside him, or the ability to be so brutal, I’d have never believed them. Had my sister known about this

version of him? Or was it something only I knew?

“Was it all true?” he asked. “The things he claimed to have done to you?”

I looked away and nodded. I’d never felt so ashamed before. Even the things I’d shared with him already paled in comparison to everything I’d been through, and what Wayne and his friends had done was only the tip of the iceberg. Being reminded of the life I’d led the last seven years made me feel so dirty.

“I’m going to slaughter them all,” he said, his voice dark and dangerous. “I refuse to let any of them live.”

“We need you, Adam. If you go to jail...” He held up a hand to stop me, and I realized I’d said his real name. “Sorry. I wasn’t thinking.”

“I’m not upset because you didn’t call me Stitches. Let’s be clear on something. I won’t go to jail. The club will help me, make sure there’s no way to tie me to any of the crime scenes. Hell, they can help make the bodies vanish.”

“How many times have you done this?” I asked.

“You don’t want to know. Let’s go home. I need to shower.”

I went outside and got back into the truck. It took a few attempts to start it because my hands shook so badly. When the engine turned over, I didn’t wait to see if Stitches was coming. I pulled away from the curb and went straight back to the compound.

What had I just witnessed? Who the hell had I married? Even though he’d seemed to relish Wayne’s pain, I

still didn't think Stitches was a bad man. I knew without a doubt he wouldn't hurt me or the girls. But just the same, I now had seen a new side to him, and I wasn't sure what to do with the information.

If he was going to shower when he got home, it meant I needed to get Marina out of the house as quickly as possible. I didn't know if Stitches had told the club about what he was doing. He said they would clean up the mess, but that didn't mean he'd talked to Badger about it beforehand. What if he got in trouble with the Devil's Fury for what he'd done?

I parked in the driveway at the house and rushed inside. Marina gave me a smile but sobered the moment she saw my face.

"What happened?" she asked.

"I need you to go. Before Stitches gets here," I said. "Please. I appreciate you sitting with the girls."

"Something happened." She stood. "Something bad. I'll go since that's what you want, but I'm only a call away if you need anything. And the girls are welcome to come spend the night if you need them to."

"Thanks, Marina." She gave me a hug before she went out to her SUV. I heard her drive off, and then the sound of Stitches' motorcycle almost immediately after. He parked next to the club truck I'd driven and came inside. The man didn't even look at me as he walked down the hall to the bedroom. I locked up and followed.

I heard the shower going and quickly stripped out of my clothes. When I joined him, he wouldn't turn around and look at me. I saw the pinkish water at his feet from the blood.

Reaching out for him, I placed my hand on his back. He flinched.

“Stitches, talk to me. Please.”

He remained silent and I felt tears prick my eyes. Was he disgusted by me now? I’d tried to tell him before. If only he’d listened before things had come this far. I couldn’t walk away now, and I didn’t think the Devil’s Fury would let me. But what about Stitches?

“I’m sorry,” I said, my voice breaking. I backed away and opened the door, getting out of the shower. I hastily pulled on some clothes and walked out of the bedroom. What would happen now? We had the girls, and I’d thought things were so wonderful. Now I...

A tear slipped down my cheek, then another. I pressed my hand to my mouth to stifle my sobs. My legs buckled and I fell to the floor. When I felt Stitches’ hands on me, I tensed.

“Hey, it’s okay, Marci. You know I’d never hurt you,” he said. “I should have never shown you that part of me.”

I shook my head and pulled away, managing to get my feet under me. I walked off, not wanting to hear anything from him right then. My heart hurt, and my mind felt like pure chaos.

“Fine. You don’t want me to touch you? I won’t.” I heard the jingle of his keys, and he left the house, slamming the door behind him. I flinched and cried even harder. Was he going to those women at the clubhouse? He’d promised he’d never cheat on me, but something changed tonight.

Why did it feel like every bit of happiness I’d gained had just left with Stitches? I checked on the girls, then went to

sit out back at the table. The only light came from the moon shining brightly in the sky. I looked up, trying to count the stars. I used to wish on them. Now I knew it was pointless.

“Well, fuck. What the hell did that asshole do?” The deep voice startled me, and I scanned the darkness. When I saw it was Ram, I tried to dry my tears. “Too late. Already saw them.”

“I’m fine.”

“No, you aren’t. What happened, Marci? Last I heard, things were going good for you two.” Ram braced his arms on the top of the fence and watched me. “Where is he right now?”

“Clubhouse, I think. He slammed the door when he left, and...” I pressed my lips together. “What if he’s with those women?”

“Then he’s a dumbass. You going to sit here and take that shit? Or go after him?”

“I don’t think I can,” I said. “He found out some things tonight. Details of what I went through. It was too much. Now he knows I’m just a filthy whore, and that’s all I’ll ever be.”

“Son of a bitch,” Ram muttered. “Did he tell you that? Did he call you a whore?”

“He didn’t have to. I think he hates me now.” I gave a humorless laugh. “I hate myself, for that matter. If it weren’t for the girls...”

Ram vaulted over the fence and sat in the chair beside mine. “You stop that right now. No talk of ending things, you hear me? Stitches cares about you. Whatever happened tonight, you need to work it out.”

“I’m not sure we can. I’m scared, Ram. I have nowhere else to go. The girls love Stitches already and think he’s their dad. What happens to me now?”

“Ah, hell. I don’t know, Marci. If it were me, I’d want my woman to fight for me, to show me she wasn’t going to give me up so easily. But I don’t know what’s going through Stitches’ head. Not sure anyone does.”

“Fight.” I stared off into the darkness. “How do I even do that?”

He grinned. “Go kick a little ass. I promise Badger won’t get mad if you put the club whores in their place. In fact, he’ll be damn proud.”

I nodded. “Would you... I mean, the girls...”

“I’ll stay right here. They’ll be fine.”

“Thank you.” I hugged him and left the yard and started walking to the clubhouse. I didn’t know what I’d find when I got there, but Ram was right. I needed to show Stitches I still wanted him, and that I would do anything to keep him. If he still didn’t want me after that, then I’d talk to Badger and see if there was a place for me and the girls.

But first... I’d give it my all and let Stitches see how much he meant to me.

Chapter Fifteen

Stitches

What the fuck had gone wrong? Was she horrified by what I'd done? I'd never wanted Marci to see that side of me, to even know I had that darkness inside me. How badly had I scared her tonight? The way she'd shied away from my touch ripped me apart inside. Even at her most terrified, she'd never done that before. She'd always trusted me to take care of her.

I downed the rest of my beer and motioned for the Prospect behind the bar to pour another. Two club whores had already tried to latch onto me and I'd had to shake them off. The only woman I wanted was at home. Not that it did me any good now. Would she move out of the bedroom while I was gone? I wouldn't blame her. I'd probably become a monster in her eyes tonight.

The doors to the clubhouse opened and I noticed the sound died down a bit. Looking to see who'd come in, I froze. Marci's eyes were red, like she'd been crying. She scanned the room, and the moment she saw me, I could have sworn I saw relief flit across her features. She came toward me, right as one of the damn club whores plastered herself against my side.

Marci stopped. I swallowed hard and couldn't move. The woman pawed at me, and I knew I needed to knock her off me, just as I had before, but some part of me wanted Marci to see other women weren't scared to touch me or let me touch them. It was wrong on so many levels, and I knew it.

She took a step, then another. When she stood in front

of me, she didn't even glance at the woman clinging to me. I saw the puffiness in her face and felt like such an ass. I'd made her cry. Why was she here? Did she not want to wait until later to tell me she wanted to leave?

"Can we talk?" she asked.

The club whore ran her hand across my chest. "He's busy. Fuck off."

Marci's eyes narrowed a fraction and she cut her gaze over to the woman. I didn't even know the bitch's name, didn't care to either. Shit. Marci had walked in here without a property cut. The club knew she was mine, but the women here didn't. Of course, a lot of them wouldn't care either way.

"I've had a really shitty night, and seeing someone paw my husband is really the last straw. Could you please go away?" Marci asked, staring at the woman.

The bitch huffed and gave a bark of laughter. "Husband? Are you for real? No one is going to believe Stitches would want someone like you. Besides, you aren't even wearing a property cut."

Marci looked at me, and I saw the anguish in her eyes. "You aren't even going to correct her? I guess hearing all that stuff earlier finally made you realize you're better off with someone else. I tried to tell you. I warned you before things went too far."

"What are you talking about?" I asked.

"You know damn well..." She stopped, pressing her lips together and I noticed she was about to cry again. "That man told you what they did to me, and now you don't want me."

Shit. Oh, fucking hell! Was that why she'd pulled away earlier? Not because she now saw me as a monster but because she thought I wouldn't want her anymore? I stood so fast the club whore fell on her ass, and I pulled Marci into my arms.

"Jesus. I'm a fucking idiot. I had no idea that's what you were thinking. I'm sorry, Marci."

"The men in this club clearly never learn from past mistakes," Colorado said. "Wasn't it Dragon who let a club whore nearly destroy his relationship with Lilian? And how many of us haven't stopped to listen to what our women said? I mean, not me clearly since I'm still single, but the rest of you fuckers need to have your ears cleaned out."

Marci sniffled and giggled a little. Since he'd made her laugh, I couldn't exactly yell at him. Besides, he wasn't wrong. If I hadn't stormed out of the house, then maybe we could have talked and I'd have realized why she hadn't wanted me to touch her. She felt dirty after hearing what Wayne had to say, and she thought I felt the same way. Never! Not once had I ever considered her to be more than a victim. Well, I did think she'd reached survivor status when she'd decided to move on with her life. Then I fucked it all up by letting her see Wayne.

All this shit was my damn fault.

"I didn't tell her to get off me because... I kind of wanted to see you knock her on her ass. Sorry about that."

Marci sobered and reached up to place her hand on my cheek. "It's not too late. I could still drag her around by her hair if you want?"

"No, I'm good. Where are the girls if you're here?" I

asked.

“Ram is at the table in our backyard. We had a quick chat before I came here. He offered to stay in case the girls needed anything before we got back. Since he’s wearing his cut, they’ll know he’s part of your club and shouldn’t be scared.”

Looked like I owed him one. Or maybe two. I gave Marci a quick kiss and led her outside. She’d never been on my bike before. I swung my leg over the seat and held my hand out to her, helping her on behind me. After making sure she was holding on tight, I started the engine and walked the bike backward onto the street. Since this was a new experience for her, I rode slow to make the moment last a little longer. Ram gave us a wave as we pulled past the house and looped around to park in the driveway. I saw him leap over the fence and walk off before I’d even gotten off the bike.

When we got inside, we checked on the girls to make sure they were still sleeping soundly. It seemed we had some things to talk about. Instead of going to the kitchen or living room, I took Marci to our bedroom and shut the door. We sat on the bed beside each other, and I held her hand. I wasn’t sure where to start.

“Earlier, I thought you didn’t want me to touch you because of what I did to that man. You’d never seen that part of me before, and I’d honestly hoped you never would.”

She shook her head. “No, Adam. That wasn’t it at all. I felt so ashamed. Even though we’d talked about what I’d been through, you heard firsthand all the vile things they did to me. I felt so unclean, and the thought of you touching me...”

“Looks like Colorado was right. We need to work on

communicating better. Because we both were afraid, we pushed each other away, then misunderstood the reason behind it. I'm sorry." I lifted her hand and kissed the back of it. "But nothing he could have said would ever make me see you any differently. I only wish I could have made him suffer more."

"The others... can you find another way to take care of them? It scares me. Not the way you tore him apart, but the fact that one small slipup could mean I lose you forever. I don't want you to take those sorts of risks in the name of revenge. Please, Adam. We need you here."

I didn't like the thought of someone else handling both men, but I understood her concerns. If it really did scare her, then I'd back off and ask the hackers to do something, or another club. As badly as I wanted those men to hurt for what they'd done, and I wanted to watch the blood drain from their worthless bodies, I knew I needed to give Marci what she needed.

"All right. I'll make some calls and see what I can do. Speaking of calls, I did hear from Wire on my way to the clubhouse."

"About Melly?" she asked.

"Yeah. There's no evidence he can find anywhere that proves she was abused. He suggested we find a child psychologist to work with her, or just keep an eye on her and see if she opens up on her own."

"I'm really worried about her not speaking, and she doesn't often show much emotion."

All those things could mean she'd been abused, but there was another explanation as well. She didn't like being

touched, didn't know how to express herself, refused to speak...

“Marci, I could be way off base, but what if she wasn't abused and she's autistic?”

“But... in the movies those kids have meltdowns and rock themselves, or bang their heads on the wall. She doesn't do anything like that.”

I squeezed her hand. “Honey, that's Hollywood and not real life. Yes, there are some children on the spectrum who display those behaviors, but not all of them do. There's a reason it's called the spectrum. It's not one-size fits all. We'd have to have her tested to know for sure, and I'm sure not just anyone can do it. But it's something to consider.”

She sighed and leaned into me. “Is it wrong that I hope that's what's wrong and that she wasn't abused by the people who were supposed to take care of her?”

“Whatever the cause, we'll figure it out. Might not be tomorrow, or even next month. It's the type of thing that will take time. But once we know what's wrong, then we can help her.”

“Are we okay now?” she asked.

“Of course. I was never angry with you, Marci. I was mad at myself. It was wrong for me to take you into that house and let you hear all that shit from Wayne, much less see what I did to him. I should have just told you I had some bad people to take care of and sent you home.”

“So why didn't you?” she asked.

“I'm not sure. Maybe some part of me wanted to scare

you into not doing something like that ever again. Following me could have been incredibly dangerous. What if I'd been on a job for the club? There will be times I can't tell you where I'm going or what I'm doing. You're going to have to trust me."

"I do! It just worried me because it was out of character." She sighed. "I promise I won't do that again."

She'd tried to shower with me earlier, and my actions had deeply hurt her. If I'd realized what she was trying to do, and that she needed reassurance I still desired her and wanted her by my side, I'd have done things differently. Maybe we could start over.

"Want to join me in the shower? I need to wash off the smell of cigarettes from the clubhouse."

She wrinkled her nose. "No offense, but you also need to wash off the cheap perfume from that woman. I wasn't going to say anything, but since you brought it up..."

I leaned down to kiss her. "Come help me. You can make sure I get extra clean while I'm in there."

Her cheeks flushed and I saw a spark of excitement in her eyes. I stood and held my hand out to her. Together, we walked into the bathroom. While I started the shower and got the water the right temperature, she stripped out of her clothes. I let her get in first while I set my cut on the dresser in the bedroom, toed off my boots, and undressed. She looked like a water goddess, her long hair hanging down her back and her face lifted to the showerhead.

If I didn't know the damage a hacker could wreak by accessing a phone or someone's cloud files, I'd take a picture.

No way in fucking hell was I going to do something that could come back to bite me on the ass. Instead, I'd have to remember this moment for years to come. Either that or buy a digital camera and print off the pictures at home, then hide them from the kids.

After admiring my wife for another moment, I got into the shower, shutting the door behind me. I placed my hands on her waist, loving the feel of her silky soft skin against my rough palms. She no longer tensed when I touched her while she had her eyes closed. While tonight made it apparent she wasn't fully healed from everything she'd been through, I knew she'd come a long way. It wasn't something that would happen overnight, or even in a few years. The healing process could very well take decades, but I'd be there with her, every step of the way.

"Do you have any idea how beautiful you are?" I asked.

She smiled a little. "Only to you, and that's fine. You're the only one who counts."

"Damn right I am!" I nipped her shoulder, making her giggle. I grabbed the soap and lathered my hands, then gently washed her. Her nipples pebbled under my touch, and I noticed her breath caught as I worked my way down her body.

She'd always been so responsive to me, even from the first time we'd been intimate. I felt honored she'd put so much faith and trust in me. I'd fucked up today, but I'd make sure it didn't happen again.

While she rinsed, I started washing myself. If she touched me right now, I wasn't sure I'd be able to hold back. I turned and gave her my back, then felt her fingers run across

my skin. A shiver went down my spine and my cock hardened even more. Did she have any idea what she was doing to me right now?

The moment she hugged me, pressing her breasts against me, my control snapped. I turned and pushed her against the wall, devouring her mouth with mine. Marci whimpered and held onto me as if her life depended on it, her nails biting into my arms. I reached down and lifted one of her legs over my hip and slid my hand between her legs. Her little clit was already hard when I gave it a stroke.

Marci cried out and her body tensed. Two more swipes of my fingers and she was coming, calling out my name. As much as I wanted to hear her beg for my cock, I couldn't wait. With one thrust, I slid in deep. Her pussy clenched down on me as I pulled out and slid back in.

“Adam, please! Make me come again.”

I knew exactly what she wanted and needed. Using long, deep strokes, I pushed both of us closer and closer to a climax. I kept her pinned to the wall as I took her like some rutting beast. When she came again, I spun her around and bent her over. She braced her hands on the wall, spread her feet apart, and offered herself up to me.

It felt like I fucked her for hours, but the water was still warm when I finally came, pumping in and out of her until every last drop of cum had been wrung from me. Panting for breath, I ran my hand down her back, and marveled at the woman I got to call my own.

“I love you,” I said.

She looked at me over her shoulder. “Did you seriously

just use the L word for the first time while you're inside me?"

I shrugged. Maybe my timing sucked, but it didn't mean the words weren't true. "You're my everything, Marci. I never knew I could need a woman, or want one by my side forever, until you."

I pulled out and she turned to face me, placing her hands on my chest. Could she feel my heart racing?

"For the record, I love you too. Have for a while now," she said. "I was too scared to say anything."

I kissed her, soft and slow this time. We washed again, then got out. As we cuddled in bed, I wondered what would have happened if Marci hadn't come to the compound with Ram. Not once had I been tempted to marry a woman. I'd thought I'd never have a wife and kids, not after losing little Rose. Then she'd entered my life again, and while trying to heal her, she'd ended up helping me as well. Now I couldn't imagine my life without her.

Tomorrow was never promised, but for however many we had together, I'd love and cherish her... both her and our girls.

Epilogue

Marci

The girls had been with us for nearly a year now. The people Wire had mentioned to Stitches weren't able to meet with Nussy, but they did recommend someone who could possibly help. We'd met with the woman a few times, and she'd agreed our daughter was special. There wasn't anything for us to do except give her our support. It was also something we tried to keep from the club. Stitches had worried his brothers might not be so understanding if they found out she talked to spirits. It was something I had trouble adjusting to as well.

Little Melly finally spoke a few months ago. Stitches had been right when he'd said she might be autistic. Between the bouncing from home to home and all the uncertainty in her life, not to mention people not knowing how to handle her, she'd retreated into herself even more. With therapy, she'd improved so much. The doctor said she was barely on the spectrum and would be able to lead a mostly normal life, but she might require medication when she was older. For now, they were observing and so were we.

I placed a hand on my belly and sighed. My period had come yet again. Even though Stitches hadn't said we were actively trying for a baby, I could see the disappointment in his eyes every time I started. He adored Nussy and Melly, and so did I, but I knew he really wanted a child that was his flesh and blood. He'd lost Rose before he even got to see her open

her eyes, and I wanted to be able to give him that precious gift.

“Everything all right?” he asked, putting his arms around me.

“My period came again,” I said.

He kissed my neck, then buried his face in the crook of my shoulder and breathed me in. I’d noticed it was something he liked to do from time to time.

“Our hands are still full with the girls. You already spoke to Dr. Larkin. He said there wasn’t any reason you can’t have another baby. It just means this isn’t the right time. Or there’s something wrong with me.”

I shook my head. “You got my sister pregnant without even trying. I doubt it’s you.”

He gave me a slight squeeze. “If all we ever have are Nussy and Melly, then I’m fine with that. Those two are a blessing, and I love them with all my heart.”

“I know you do. If you didn’t, our one guinea pig wouldn’t have turned into *two* guinea pigs. I still say Custard was enough.”

“Doolittle needed a home for Ebony, and since they’re both girls, there’s no reason they can’t be together. Still, they each have their own cage and play together with the girls. What’s so wrong with that?” he asked.

“Because *you* don’t clean their cages. Do you have any idea how much guinea pig pee stinks?” I wrinkled my nose. “We’re going through so much bedding because I scrape their cages out every few days.”

“He said we could litter box train them. No harm in

trying, right?”

“Fine. You train them.” I tipped my head back and looked up at him. “Besides, I think Ebony likes you more than me. She keeps nipping me when I try to pick her up.”

I went back to watching the girls in the backyard. Marina had sent their triplets over again, and Nessy and Melly were having a blast. Nikolay still stayed near Melly when he came over, and our little girl adored him. In fact, he’d been the one she spoke to first. I felt a little jealous.

“Any word on Mariah and Farrah?” I asked. “They’ve been gone for two months already.”

The move surprised me, in all honesty. Even though Stitches had discussed the issue with Badger before, I hadn’t thought they would do something so drastic. It had taken Mariah and Farrah acting out a few more times before other people in the club started demanding something be done. It never occurred to me they’d ask them to leave, even if it wasn’t permanently. To some it might have seemed harsh, but after all the trouble they’d caused, I could understand. From what I’d heard, even their parents were okay with the decision.

“They’re still with Casper. I don’t know why he volunteered to sort them out. Maybe because they’re best friends with his granddaughters. Either way, I don’t expect them back for another few weeks. I know their kids are missing them, and so are Demon and Savage, but it needed to be done.”

It had shaken the entire club when Badger, Demon, and Savage all stood together and told Mariah and Farrah they had to leave. No one had seen it coming, except perhaps Stitches. He hadn’t reacted at all, which made me think he’d had a hand

in it.

Since they'd been gone, things had been peaceful around here. In fact, there was a different vibe in the club. It felt more welcoming, and everyone seemed to be getting along. Although, I'd noticed Mariah's and Farrah's families seemed a bit down. I couldn't blame them. I was sure they missed them.

"Our girls are happy and adjusting well. Everyone in the club seems to like you. What do you need now, Marci?" he asked. "I'll give you the world."

"You already did." I leaned into him. "Thanks to the hackers, the other two men who hurt me are going to spend the rest of their lives in prison. You gave me a home, a family... your heart."

I turned and faced him, going up on my tiptoes to kiss him. There wasn't anything else I wanted, except perhaps a baby created by the two of us. But as he'd said, if it was meant to happen, it would. For now, I was the happiest I'd ever been, and I couldn't imagine ever wanting or needing more than this.

"I love you, Marci. You and our girls."

I smiled. "And we love you too. So very much. You're our hero. Our knight in shining armor. Those girls will have a hard time finding husbands in the future because their dad is perfect. Not sure there's anyone out there who will ever compare."

"I'm sure they'll find someone. Then I'll have to bury them."

I put my face against his shirt and laughed softly. Yeah, I could see him doing that. I almost felt sorry for any boys

who wanted to date Nesy and Melly. They'd not only have to go through Stitches, but the entire club.

My life had been hell for so long. Now it was amazing, and I owed it all to the man holding me right now.

His phone vibrated and he cursed, pulling it from his pocket. "It's Badger. Looks like he's calling Church. Something about the school situation."

My brow furrowed. "You mean the thing Talia tried to handle?"

He nodded. "Yeah. Not sure what's going on, but I guess I'll find out. I want this shit settled before our girls are old enough to go to school. If anyone says a damn word to them about this club only having whores for women, the population of this town is going to shrink by a lot."

"Because you're going to kill all their parents?" I asked.

"Maybe." He winked and kissed me. "Better for you not to know. I'll be home as soon as I can. If the kids get to be too much, send the triplets home and put a movie on for the girls."

"Love you," I called as he went out the gate toward the front of the house.

"Love you too," he yelled back.

Yeah. This was as close to perfect as life could get. Things might be messy from time to time, and my husband may get a little bloodthirsty when it came to someone harming his family, but at the end of the day I had an amazing man by my side and two precious girls I'd thought I'd lost. Nothing

could be better than that.

Author's Note

Dear Reader,

Thanks for picking up a copy of *Stitches*! I hope you enjoyed the story. If it's not too much trouble, I'd really love it if you had a moment to leave a rating or review at your favorite bookseller or over at Goodreads/BookBub. And yes, I do read them! Whether you loved it or hated it, I like hearing what my readers think of my books.

Let's face it... this wouldn't have been a Harley Wyldre book without some darkness, violence, and difficult subjects. I'm sure the topics hit harder for some than others. *Stitches'* story had a bit of a continuation from the last book, *Ram*, although I tried to write in such a way you could dive in even if you were new to the series. Hopefully, I succeeded. But if you did feel lost, or want to know more about Vega and the women Ram brought to the Devil's Fury, you can grab his book at multiple booksellers.

Some of you have let me know how much you detest the Devil's Fury after what happened in previous books. It's my hope they will slowly redeem themselves. After all, they're only human (all right, *imaginary* humans, but still...). Everyone makes mistakes, even our favorite heroes — whether fictional or in real life. While romances are typically about the “perfect” hero or alpha male, my guys (and gals) still have faults. Falling in love doesn't wash them clean of all sins. So, even though the Devil's Fury have acted like a bunch of idiots lately, I hope you'll give them a chance to prove they're

still worth admiring.

Wondering what's up with little Nesy? And who are the mysterious people Wire mentioned? Well, that would be the Devoted Guardians MC, and yes, they have their own series! You'll hear more about Nesy in future books as she grows up.

Thanks for your support! It's much appreciated.

Until next time...

Harley

Dedication and Acknowledgment

To everyone who has lost a child or significant other... my heart goes out to you. I can't think of anything harder to do than continuing on without those closest to us.

Shout out to my beta readers: Dawn, Jen, Tami, Shelby, & Lisa! Thanks for all the feedback before Stitches made it into my editor's hands.

My Patreon Tier 3 supporters: Melissa, Candace, Arran, Michelle, Elizabeth, & Sagan. Your support means so much to me! Also special thanks to all my other Patreon supporters!

The Wyldlings — thanks for all the shares, comments, and helping cheer me up when I'm having a rough day.

Changeling Press Staff — to everyone who had a hand in polishing Stitches' story, thank you! Special thanks to Crystal, my editor with the patience of a saint, and Bryan Keller, the cover artist who always seems to give me the cover I need, even if I don't realize it.

Marteeka Karland — I appreciate you asking your hospital staff the million questions I had about stillbirth paperwork! Google isn't always right, so I prefer going to the professionals.

And HUGE thank you to Starbucks, especially the local baristas, for making the countless white mochas that fuel my brain. Now, can we discuss availability until 11 p.m.? Because I'm definitely not a morning person.

Playlist

Paint it Black by The Rolling Stones

What Ya Gonna Do by Hinder

Thank You for Hating Me by Citizen Soldier

Better Dig Two by The Band Perry

Déjà Vu by No Silence

The Sound of Silence by Disturbed

Bat Country by Avenged Sevenfold

Whiskey Lullaby by Brad Paisley & Alison Krauss

What About Now by Daughtry

Someone You Loved by Lewis Capaldi

[Harley Wylde](#)

Harley Wylde is an accomplished author known for her captivating MC Romances. With an unwavering commitment to sensual storytelling, Wylde immerses her readers in an exciting world of fierce men and irresistible women. Her works exude passion, danger, and gritty realism, while still managing to end on a satisfying note each time.

When not crafting her tales, Wylde spends her time brainstorming new plotlines, indulging in a hot cup of Starbucks, or delving into a good book. She has a particular affinity for supernatural horror literature and movies. Visit Wylde's website to learn more about her works and upcoming events, and don't forget to sign up for her newsletter to receive exclusive discounts and other exciting perks.

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