

Center of Gravity

Marauders: Book Three

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by Lina Andersson

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Dedication:

For Mom, who made me love books

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Acknowledgments:

Writing isn't as much of a solitary occupation as some think it is, and I find that I often need help and have questions. I'd like to take this opportunity to thank those who have helped me with this book.

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In physics, **Center of Gravity** is, among other things, used in the uniform gravity field to describe an object's response to external forces and torques.

In the military, it's a concept developed by Carl von Clausewits in his work 'On War.' United States Department of Defense defines it as 'the source of power that provides moral or physical strength, freedom of action, or will to act.'

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4.

And both of them have feet and legs for nimble tripping,
And waltzing and skipping
Most gracefully in stockings and shoes;
And both can dance about till it pleases and provokes one,
And both have naughty little hands to fondle and to coax one,
And nails which as claws they can use.

"Marauders" - Gustaf Fröding

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PROLOGUE

Swim or Sink

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In certain situations, Mitch's brain started to throw facts at him. Sometimes just random, weird facts that didn't seem to fit the current situation, but this time it wasn't random at all. He was thinking about Bocca Della Verità, the marble Mouth of Truth in Rome, and it made perfect sense.

He looked around at the people gathered inside the warehouse belonging to the Marauder Riders in Emporia, Kansas. It was pretty much packed. The presidents and treasurers from all along their smuggling pipeline were there, and they were all looking at the same thing.

A few months back, four of the guys in the charter Mitch belonged to, Greenville, Arizona, had been caught with pot and guns, and they were currently serving a fourteen months sentence inside. The members inside were Mitch's brother Mac, their SAA Bull, Dawg, and finally their treasurer, Sisco. Initially, Mitch had thought that the fact that Mac ended up inside would have the biggest impact on him, but he'd been wrong.

Brick—Mitch's dad and the president in Greenville—had woken Mitch up one morning not long after the others had been arrested, and he told him it was time for Mitch to use the head on his shoulders instead of the one between his legs. It was, in short, time for him to be of some fucking use to the club and to use his famous smarts to take charge of the finances while Sisco did time. Mitch had actually been happy for the opportunity. He liked numbers; they made sense to him.

Once the others went inside, Mitch had spent the following months filling in the gaps and learning what he needed to know to be able take care of the books. In the process, he'd

realized someone within the club was skimming money in transfers between different charters.

At first, he'd been terrified it was someone in his own club, and he'd spent a couple of weeks making sure it wasn't anyone in Greenville, then he'd made sure it wasn't anyone in Englewood, the mother charter, so he'd known where he could turn to get help. Finally, he told his dad and their VP, Bear, about it. They'd agreed that sending him to up Englewood was a good idea, and he'd spent some time with their treasurer, Dutch. It had taken them quite some time to find all the money trails, but they'd soon figured out who the guilty person was, and they'd made sure he was the only one involved.

It was the Treasurer from the Emporia charter, Charlie 'Hump' Daniels.

Mitch's brother, Mac, had prospected in Emporia, so Mitch knew quite a lot about them. During the year Mac prospected, Emporia had run into problems with a local biker club. They weren't big, but had some friends with muscles and it ended up in another turf war about pot.

Mitch wasn't surprised that more and more states in the US were looking into legalizing pot. It would most likely free up a big amount of the cops' time and spare them shitloads of resources. It would, without a doubt, result in the Marauders losing money, and he hoped it wouldn't get legalized in too many states, but he sure as shit could see why the authorities were giving up on weed in their war on drugs.

Earlier that day, Mitch, Brick, Dutch, and the president of the mother charter, Chucky, had sat down with Rabbit, the local president, to tell him what they'd found.

Rabbit had turned pale white when they told him. At first, he refused to believe them and it had taken Mitch and Dutch over an hour of explaining, showing papers, giving proof, before Rabbit finally sat up straight, sighed deeply, and ran his fingers through his hair.

"He's been complaining about you guys holding back on us, that we deserve a bigger cut and all along..." Rabbit had growled when the sense of betrayal kicked in and he started to

get pissed instead of sad. “The fucker’s been stealing from us. Taking from our parts of the cut.”

Mitch had only been a member for just over a year, but he grew up in the club, and he knew how things worked long before he got his prospect patch. There would be a vote among the Emporia members, Hump would be voted out in bad standing, and Mitch had thought there was a good chance they’d also vote on Hump being executed.

He’d been wrong about that last part, but Hump was still paying in blood.

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Mitch had always wanted to become a Marauder. He and Mac had started talking about it when they were just kids—the day when they’d both wear the patch and what it would be like.

They’d both also been interested in computers, but while Mac went on about why Macs were so much better than PCs, hence his nickname Mac, Mitch didn’t give a shit about the things that were so important to Mac when it came to computers. While Mac just wanted a computer that worked, Mitch wanted to know *how* they worked, and how to make them work better. He wanted to understand them, and find out how he could use them for more than just gaming and surfing. He’d quickly discovered that everything with computers was logical, and it was numbers—something he understood.

Numbers was something he’d always gotten. When he was in school he never understood why they spent so much time going through math problems or different ways of counting; he thought it was a complete waste of time. When he got older, he realized that he grasped things faster than most people did, and, since he got bored extremely easily, he started trying to make school more fun in his own way. ‘More fun’ was annoying teachers at first, and then, around fourteen, it turned into girls. Making out later graduated to blowjobs, and finally fucking. He’d thought it was a lot more interesting to figure out how girls worked than going to classes where teachers tried to teach him things he already knew.

One day Mech, the charter's tech guy, had knocked on the door to his room. Brick had been standing behind him looking pissed as hell. Mech had discovered Mac's extracurricular activities, which included hacking. Brick had bellowed that if he was going to do shit like that, he should fucking know what he was doing, and had set him up with Mech. At first, Mitch thought it was a drag because to him Mech was the boring guy who hardly ever partied and generally went home to his high school sweetheart and their two kids instead of hanging out at the club to get stupid drunk and laid.

He'd quickly discovered that Mech might seem like a boring guy compared to the other members, but online, Mech was a fucking legend—a geek god. Unknowingly to Mitch, he'd idolized Mech for years. He just hadn't known it was Mech, since he was known online under a completely different name—Blue Knight—and he'd been willing to teach Mitch everything he knew.

Mitch'd been pretty bummed out when Mac did his usual overthinking thing and decided to prospect in another charter to make sure he made a name for himself, and he'd left for Kansas around the same time as Mitch finished high school.

Even if Mitch'd never bothered with studying, he still did well in school. He took the tests and got his diploma, but then he refused to continue studying—to his mom and dad's horror. At twenty-one he became a prospect.

As opposed to Mac, Mitch didn't give a fuck about making a name for himself, and Mech had taken him on as a prospect in Greenville. It felt better than having his dad doing it, but either way, they hadn't let him off easy. He'd done the same grunt work as any other prospect. Sometimes even worse, because they wanted to make sure he knew that the fact that his dad was at the head of the table didn't fucking matter if he was going to prove himself worthy of the top rocker.

And here he was, just over a year as a member, and he was watching another member tied to a chair bleeding, all while his own brain was firing off random facts about Bocca Della Verità.

Hump was tied to a chair, bleeding and crying. They'd taken off his ink with a sander, and he'd tried to not scream, but he had. He'd screamed himself to a sore throat, and now he was crying with hoarse sobs.

Mitch was looking at the floor and the reason he kept thinking about that damn face carved into Pavonozzo marble: Hump's right hand.

Not two minutes earlier, Manchu, the SAA in Emporia, had grabbed Hump's right hand and said, "I believe this is the customary way to deal with thieves."

Then he'd chopped it off.

It wasn't just the thieving, it was the symbolism of it being his gas hand. Hump wouldn't ride again. Not that it mattered because he didn't own any bikes anymore; the club had taken them all as payment for the money he stole and the betrayal.

It was Hump's hand on the floor that had led to Mitch thinking about the Mouth of Truth, which was a carving of a face with a hole for the mouth. It was believed to be a lie detector; if a person spoke a lie while having his or her hand inside the mouth, the hand would be bitten off.

He looked towards the oil barrel where Hump's cut was burning, and then turned his head towards his dad. Brick was studying him and raised his eyebrows in an unspoken question. He wanted to know how he was doing. Mitch shrugged. He wouldn't have known what to answer even with words.

He knew about these things; he'd heard about them since he was a kid, but it was something quite different to see it—to be there when it happened. He'd been brought up to hate anyone who betrayed the club, to think they deserved whatever they got, and he hadn't changed his mind about it, but it was still different to be there when the punishment was executed.

In this case, it was his words that had set it off. He'd started it. It was a strange chain of events to him. The fear when he realized what was going on, the relief when he knew

for sure the betrayal wasn't from anyone in Greenville, the rush when he knew who it was, and now the realization that the hand on the floor was the end of a series of events that had happened because of him. It wasn't that he thought it was wrong. It was more... surprising to see his actions having such direct consequences.

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"You okay, son?" his dad asked and sat down next to him.

It was a few hours later, they were in the Emporia clubhouse, and the warehouse had been cleaned up while someone dumped Hump outside the E.R.

"Yeah. I'm fine."

"Sure?"

"I'm sure."

"It's not on you."

"I know that."

He *did* know that. It was on Hump. He'd made the choice to fuck with the club. Whatever happened as a result of that was on him and no one else.

"You did good. Talked to Dutch, and he's impressed. He said you came up with a different way to use the new accounting system. A way to avoid this happening again."

"We talked about it a bit when I was there." Mitch looked at his dad. "Thought I'd stay with them in Englewood for a while and sort it out."

"Do that." Brick patted his shoulder. "Remember what your mom always says: Swim or sink."

He must look really bad if his dad felt the need to bring up his mom. Not that there was a lot of bad blood between the two of them, but Brick didn't mention her often. He knew Mitch was close to her, a lot closer than Mac was, and he was right—that was her favorite saying in any goddamn situation. Swim or sink, in that order, because his mom claimed that you should always have the good option first, and that sinking, giving up, wasn't really an option at all.

“I’ll keep swimming,” he smiled. “I’m going home with you guys before going up to Englewood. I wanna visit Mac.”

Mac was the one he could always talk to, and Mitch needed to sort this out by talking out loud about it. Mac was the only one he could do that with, and he would never judge Mitch for how he felt about anything. He missed his blood brother, and it would’ve felt good to have him there today because Mac would’ve known his every feeling without him having to explain it.

At the moment he had some problems understanding his own feelings. What had happened had somehow made him feel even more *in* the club, in some weird way. He’d grown up with these men, he’d prospected with them, and he’d been a member for a year, but what had gone down tonight was something new. Something he hadn’t experienced before, at least not like this. He’d been proud and eager when his dad had told him to step up and take his responsibility. This should somehow make him freak out and shy back, but it had had the direct opposite effect—he felt more like a part of the club than he ever had before.

A while later one of the girls came up to him, but for once he didn’t feel like fucking. He wanted to be alone. He wanted to try to preserve the feeling of belonging a little longer, not fuck it away. So he grabbed a bottle of Jack and went to bed alone.

CHAPTER ONE

My Leg?

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I opened my eyes, and it was so terribly hard. I didn't know where I was, and for a second I panicked. Then I felt the pain surging through my entire body, and I forgot completely about the panic. I could hardly move without feeling as if I was being torn to pieces. Carefully looking down, I saw my left leg propped up in a cast. It seemed to cover my entire leg, from my ankle to my upper thigh. I lifted my hands and saw the drip needles.

That's when my hearing slowly came back, and I heard the machines' rhythmic beeping. The next thing I noticed was a man's voice.

“Miss Dob... Dobror... Miss Anna, can you hear me?”

No surprise there. People were never able to pronounce my last name—Dobronravov. I couldn't answer him, though. I tried, but my mouth was too dry, and then I felt sleepy again. It was impossible for me to keep my eyes open. After a few attempts to stop it, I gave up and closed my eyes.

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“Anna, love, can you hear me?”

This time I couldn't open my eyes at all; it was impossible. I finally settled on nodding while trying to find some saliva in my mouth. I knew this voice, and I wanted to do what she asked, since it was my aunt, Irina.

“Zvezda, you need to open your eyes, honey,” she continued. “Please open your eyes for me.”

I managed, and even through the blur, I could see her smile. I knew her smile so well; I'd seen it at pretty much every important moment throughout my life. She leaned

forward, holding a straw in front of me. Trusting it was water I opened my mouth to accept it.

“Careful, Anna. Not too much.”

“My leg?” I asked as soon as my tongue seemed to be able to form words again. It was more of a slur, but she understood.

“Anna, I’m so sorry.” She shook her head, and I saw the tears in her eyes.

I didn’t need to hear anymore. It was pretty obvious. I could clearly remember the cast covering it, so it was at least broken, probably more, but I had no memory of how I’d ended up here—what had happened. But my leg was broken, and in combination with Irina’s tears I knew what it meant. I would never dance again. I laid my head back down and fell asleep feeling the tears running down the sides of my face.

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Both my parents and my aunt Irina started and ended their careers as dancers at the ballet in Phoenix. It had been the base for the American side of the family since the mid twentieth century. I grew up in a small town just outside Phoenix, in the very same apartment that both my aunt and my dad had grown up. My parents wanted me to have somewhat of a normal life, so I was in a regular school until I was fourteen.

When I was twelve, my parents moved to Spain to work as choreographers. At first they wanted to take me with them, but having already been promised that I’d be allowed to apply to the School of American Ballet when I was fourteen, I refused and instead stayed behind and lived with Irina for the last two years. It didn’t matter much; the four of us had always lived together, and I was as close to her as I was to my parents. More importantly, she was my main trainer. I went to regular ballet schools of course, but my morning and evening training was with her. Then, at fourteen, I applied and was accepted at the School of American Ballet, and consequently moved to New York.

Irina stayed behind to become the ballet mistress at the Phoenix Ballet, and during school holidays I went to stay with her.

At eighteen, I joined the corps de ballet at the New York City Ballet; it was a dream come true. I was a soloist at twenty and already at twenty-two a principal dancer. I had it in my blood, and I'd danced for as long as I could remember.

But it was all over now. I knew it. There was absolutely no question about it, and no matter how long I'd danced, or how much I would train from this day on, I wouldn't dance again. It had been months since I'd woken up that first time, and nothing anyone had said since had made me think anything but that my leg was ruined forever.

I watched as the doctors started to remove the cast. They had warned me about what I'd see, but once it was all gone, both Irina and I took a deep breath. My leg had not just been broken, it had pretty much been crushed and there had been damage to my hip as well, which had caused injuries to both my femoral and sciatic nerve.

In short: I should count myself lucky if I would ever be able to walk properly again, and not even that was very likely.

But no warnings had prepared me for what I saw. There were scars all over it—like a street map of angry red lines covering it from my mid calf to my hip, and I grabbed Irina's hand while trying to hold my tears back.

I still couldn't remember the accident, and according to the doctors it was quite possible I never would. I would actually prefer it if I never did, since it didn't seem like a memory worth preserving.

I'd been hit by a cab. I'd been in a hurry since I'd missed my bus, and I'd missed my bus because I'd forgotten to turn off the coffee machine and had run back inside to do it.

I'd managed to catch the second bus, but when I ran around it to cross the street after I got off, I hadn't paid attention and had been hit by a cab at full speed. If I'd simply left the coffee machine on, or had gone off at the back of the bus and rounded it with full view of the street to my left—which is what one is supposed to do—I would've been fine. And instead of looking at the mess formerly known as my leg,

I would be at rehearsals for Balanchine's *The Four Temperaments*.

I'd always known being a dancer was something that would end somewhere in my late thirties, or early forties if I was lucky. It had never been a long-term solution, but I had always figured I would still be able to do some dancing, at least work with dancing—maybe teaching. Judging by the state of my leg, that wasn't going to happen. Ever. Like they'd said, I should count myself lucky if I could ever walk properly. I would, most likely, limp my way through the rest of my life.

Later that night, I was back in the bed with a new soft cast covering my leg. It felt just as good; I didn't want to see it. Irina was sitting next to me, just like she'd done from the very beginning. She stroked the hair out of my face.

"I called your parents. They'll be here in a few weeks."

They were busy with their work, I knew, and I understood. She seemed scared I wouldn't, so she continued,

"They want to be here, you know that, but they're in the middle of training for the new—"

"Irina, it's okay, I understand. Shouldn't you be in the middle of training for the next performance?"

"In two weeks." Irina took a deep breath. "How do you feel about Greenville?"

That's where I grew up. In what was now Irina's apartment in Greenville. It had been in the family since the forties; at times it had been empty, but had always been owned by the Dobronravovs since the building was built. Mom and Dad had moved there when I was born, and Irina had come to stay with us when I was three.

"Feels like a good place for a break," I finally said.

Not like I had much of a choice, and it didn't really matter to me. At the moment, I wasn't even capable of going to the bathroom by myself. Irina had room for me, my old room, and it was private. As private as a room in someone else's apartment could be.

“The town has changed since you left.”

“Yeah. Sure it has,” I chuckled. “You know, I used to come back for most holidays—as in just last Christmas. And unless it’s been a remarkable change in just a few months, it’s just as it was when I was fourteen.”

She gave my forehead a kiss. “Remember what your dream was when you were a kid and spent hours training in our practice room?”

“To be a principal dancer in the New York City Ballet,” I mumbled.

“And no matter what happens, you reached one of your life goals. People grow to be eighty without doing that or even working for it the way you did. Never forget that, *Zvezda*.”

“*Spasibo, Tetya*.”

We didn’t speak much Russian, just words here and there. Like my nickname, *zvezda*, which meant star. ‘Tetya’ was aunt, and on occasion some swearwords sneaked in, too. Mom had always spoken Russian with me, though, since she was born there, so I knew it fairly well. At least a lot better than Dad and Irina did.

“You’ll be fine, my love. Your life hasn’t ended, and you have a new interesting future ahead of you.”

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The first year after moving back to Greenville was a lot about adapting and learning basic things again. I cried a lot, but slowly my new situation became manageable.

At the end of that first year, I walked into a tattoo parlor in Phoenix. It had been recommended to me by my physical therapist, Brett, who’d said that no matter which one of the artists I ended up with, I’d be in good hands. I was met by a heavily tattooed and pierced woman somewhere in her forties.

“Hi,” I said. I was nervous. I had no idea how these things worked. “I have a vague idea for a tattoo, and I’d like to talk to someone about it.”

“What kind of a tattoo is it?”

“Well, that’s what I need some help with. It should have something to do with dancing, maybe ballet shoes, or... I’m not sure.”

This was probably stupid. I should’ve had a finished picture, but I just wasn’t sure. The research I’d done made me believe it was better if the artist told me what was possible and what wasn’t. Since I didn’t know much about tattoos, I figured it was for the best.

“Anna?”

I turned and for the first time noticed the other person behind the counter—a young girl with purple hair. I had no idea who she was, and she must’ve noticed my confusion.

“I’m Violet Baxter... or it was Warren, you used to—”

“Of course! Sorry, I didn’t recognize you.”

Violet was Lisa’s baby sister. Lisa and I had been friends through school. Mainly since I had my dancing and didn’t have time for anything outside school, and Lisa’s best friends were two brothers she knew through the biker club her dad was in. The Baxter boys, as my parents used to call them with a huff, were infamous in school, and the younger one was the same age as Lisa and me.

Lisa hadn’t shared any classes with him, so she’d hung with me at school a lot. She quite often helped me with my homework, since she was smart, and I didn’t care much about it.

I smiled at Violet. “You grew up.”

Violet had always been a quiet little sister who hung around and... drew. Was she a tattoo artist? I quickly did the math in my head. She couldn’t be more than twenty-one.

“You work here?” I asked.

“Yes,” she answered, and I noticed her looking at my cane.

My parents had bought it for me when it had become evident that I was most likely going to need one for the rest of my life, or at least for a really long time. It was beautiful;

black with a silver handle and engraved flowers in an Art Nouveau style—Russian, of course.

“As a tattoo artist?” I asked, and she nodded. “Since when?”

“Since I was sixteen,” she smiled. “I loved drawing and this is a way to make living art.”

“This might sound rude, but are you any good?”

It was half a joke, since she still seemed very young, but if she were an artist, it would be a comfort to have someone I knew doing the tattoo. Also, I had let Violet watch me practice a couple of times. She’d said she wanted to try to draw dancing. She couldn’t have been more than twelve, but the drawings had been beautiful.

“Yes,” she answered.

“Don’t let her fool you,” the pierced woman said with a laugh. “She’s not *good*. She’s extremely good. Wins prizes all the time. If she can schedule you in, you’re a lucky woman and in *very* good hands.”

I noticed Violet looking at my cane again, and I figured she was uncomfortable with asking about it, but that turned out to not be the case.

“Dad told me you were in an accident. I think your aunt mentioned it to him when they met.”

“Yes,” I tried to smile. “I’m sort of stuck with this, but I’m fully healed. This is as good as it gets.”

“Okay. It’s just that, we don’t ink unless...”

“I know,” I said. “I did some research.”

“And it’s not a good way to cover scars,” she said looking rather uncomfortable. “At least not scars that new. They need to have healed a few years and preferably faded.”

“I know, and frankly you’d have to tattoo most of the leg, but I want it on my good leg.”

“I’m so sorry about the accident. I can’t imagine...” She gave me a weak smile. “It must be as if I lost my hands.”

It hit me that she probably understood better than most, and that's when I decided I really wanted her to do it for me.

“Thank you. If you think you could squeeze me in, I'd love to have you do it. I'll be in the area for a while, so there's no hurry.”

“If you come to the back we can see what we can come up with, and if you like it we'll make an appointment. I need to know what you want so I know how much time we need.”

When she came walking around the counter, I almost fell over. She was pregnant! I had no idea how I'd missed it to begin with, but she had a visible bulge on her belly and the rest of her body was quite skinny, so she had to be pregnant. I did the math again. And yes, she was twenty-one, I was sure.

“You're pregnant?” I finally managed to say. “I'm sorry, I was just surprised.”

“It's okay. I'm pretty used to people being surprised about me being young when I do things,” she mumbled. “I'm married.”

“I didn't... I didn't mean to judge you. I was just... I mainly remember you as that very young and,” I almost said ‘shy’ but swallowed it. “And you must've been twelve or thirteen the last time I saw you.” I smiled. “Congratulations, how far along are you?”

“Seventeen weeks,” she said and gave me a smile back. “And thank you.”

I realized what else she'd said. That she was married, and she'd introduced herself as Violet Baxter. “You're married to one of the Baxter brothers?”

“Yes. Mac,” she said with a smile. “Not Mitch.”

She probably knew why I'd asked, and I laughed. As I remembered it, Mac had been a calm and pretty nice guy despite his reputation. Mitch, on the other hand, he'd been known as the guy who got around, to put it mildly.

I followed her to the back room, and thirty minutes later I was amazed. Violet was really good at this. I'd given her some

vague descriptions of dancing, movement, and in black—and she came up with something really beautiful that looked like the outline of a dancer in movement. Even if I never knew much about them, I had always liked tattoos, but it was not a smart thing when you were a dancer. Irina had come up with the idea of me doing things I couldn't or wouldn't do while I was a dancer, so a tattoo was on the list.

Having big breakfasts was already a part of my daily routine. That was something I hadn't done since I was a kid. I had some other goals, things I wanted to be able to do that I hadn't before.

Then there were the things from my old life that I'd like to be able to revisit, like going to see a ballet, but I was not even close to ready for that yet. I'd accidentally heard the music to Swan Lake just two weeks earlier and had fallen apart. I wanted this tattoo as a symbol for something I had been, that I was proud of, but that was now a finished chapter in my life.

Violet booked me an appointment two weeks later. She admitted she'd squeezed me in on what would've been her day off, so I was really grateful. I wanted the ink on my leg, my good one, and she promised to make sure we'd have privacy. If I had to drop my pants, I wanted to make sure no one would be around to see my bad leg.

As I was about to leave I turned around to Violet again.

“If Lisa's ever in town, think you could ask her to call me?”

“Sure. She's coming down next week, and she's going to stay for a while. I'll give her your number.”

“Please do.”

I hadn't seen Lisa in years. We'd met up when I went back to Greenville for holidays my first years in New York. Then she went to college, I tended to stay in New York more and more, phone calls became more rare, and letters fewer and further between until they eventually stopped. It wasn't a big thing. No huge falling out; we just lost track. Irina used to give

me updates, and I was sure that she had some reports on how I was doing from her dad.

As I remembered it, Lisa was one of those people who always managed to pick me up from my bad moods, and she'd always been a lot of fun. She was also pretty much the only close friend I'd had who wasn't a dancer. I wanted to stay away from the dancers.

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I had physical therapy the next day. I still had to go, and they had asked me to keep it up for as long as possible, preferably the rest of my life. The limping could cause further problems to my hip, my back, and my good leg. The nerve damage would also eventually make my muscles weaker, which in turn would cause stiffness and more limping. The best way to avoid it was to keep up with the training.

The first time had been kind of fun when Brett was trying to help me stretch. I'd finally told him that I'd been a ballet dancer, and if he wanted to stretch my muscles he would have to make much more of an effort than he was doing.

I liked him, though. He didn't coddle me, he pushed me hard, and that was what I liked about him. I'd been pushing my body since I was four, and I tried to see this the same way as I had the dancing. It was vital to keep my body in as good shape as possible, even now. I knew Irina and my parents had been worried that I'd just let everything go now, but I didn't. Brett had given me exercises that I did every morning and often at night, too. My leg was usually even stiffer in the morning, and that could lead to pain as soon as I started walking if I didn't try to massage and exercise it off as soon as I woke up.

Brett was one of few people I was comfortable with seeing my leg. I didn't have much of a choice; he massaged it and after the first five times it felt okay. I assumed he'd seen worse—or at least just as bad.

“Figured out what you want to do for a living yet?” he asked as he stretched my bad leg.

“No. Got any ideas?”

He held it out straight to massage the muscles and the scar tissue on the back of my leg.

“Well, any job that keeps you standing up is pretty much out of the question—at least for now. Although moving around a little bit might be good for you.” He had a big smile. “How about receptionist?”

“You do know that I’ve been dancing my entire life? I mean, I have a high school diploma, but that’s pretty much it.”

“Answering the phone and making appointments doesn’t require more than a diploma. And you’ve been a dancer, that requires a lot of discipline.”

“That’s nice of you to say, but people don’t always see it that way. They see an airhead who spent her entire life prancing around in a tutu not giving a crap about anything else.”

He laughed and put the leg down, and started to massage the front of it.

“If you got the opportunity, would you take it?”

“Sure. Sounds like something I could do. Getting pretty tired of walking around at home. It could be nice, something to take my mind off things.”

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Brett called me two days later. A friend of his worked at a small theater in Phoenix and they needed someone in the reception. The pay wasn’t good, but it was something. I still lived at Irina’s, so I didn’t have many expenses, and I had saved all the money from the insurance that was paid out for my ruined leg. My parents had insisted on the insurance policy, and even paid the premium. That was what important choreographers could do, since they actually earned a lot of money. I had found it extremely embarrassing at the time, but considering what had happened, I was pretty happy about it now.

I was at the theater just the next day. It really was small, but it had a family feeling to it, so I liked it. It wasn’t just reception work, but selling tickets, and generally just helping

where it was needed. It seemed okay, and it was at least something to do. After living with an extremely strict routine since I was fourteen, I missed having a routine and this would help to get some of that back. It was theater—an environment I missed, but not dance which would just make me sad. Good middle ground, in other words.

That's when Lisa called. She was in Greenville and was going to stay for a week, so she wanted to see me.

“Can you meet me at the compound?”

“At the compound? The clubhouse?” I laughed. I'd been there but found the place pretty scary. Just like I found her dad quite intimidating as well. I'd been wrong about Bear, though, and once I stopped going quiet and just staring at him whenever he was close by, he turned out to be a really nice man. “Sure, I'll just wave my cane around if anyone comes close.”

“Oh, Vi told me about your cane, she said it was beautiful.”

“It is.” And that was how I remembered Lisa, always seeing the silver lining—I might have a cane, but it was a beautiful cane. “Gotta have some perks when I'm hobbling around.”

“I was so sad to hear about the accident, but I don't want to talk about that on the phone. We'll get to that when you're ready for it.”

“Thank you.”

And another typical Lisa trait, she'd make me talk about it, pushing just the right amount of what I could handle. It had always been like that. Whenever all the training got to me when I was younger, she noticed and made me talk about it, gave me the positive side, or whatever I needed to continue.

We decided I'd meet her the next day around noon, she said she'd be there from early morning, so whenever it suited me was fine. I also threatened her with serious bodily damage with the use of my cane if she wasn't there. I did not want to walk in among those men, and realize I was alone in there.

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CHAPTER TWO

You're a Shitty Wingman

-o0o-

It was a slow Wednesday, and Mitch was lying on the couch at the clubhouse. He looked around and noticed Mac coming towards him.

“Finding anyone?” Mac asked as he dropped down into an armchair.

“Nope. Think I’ll head over to The Booty Bank. Heard there was a new girl working tonight.”

The Booty Bank was the strip club owned by the Marauders. Almost all of their sweetbutts worked there, and most of the girls working there were sweetbutts. It used to be how the club laundered their money until they came up with a better system for it. They’d still kept the clubs, though.

Sisco, Mac and the others had been released about eighteen months earlier, and Mitch had been worried that he’d be pushed back to not doing much for the club again, but Sisco’d told him to keep helping. Sisco was good with finances, but didn’t know much about computers, so Mitch was handling that part of the finances. He’d also taken a bigger part in helping Mech with the intel. He liked it, and he especially liked the feeling trusted of being with those things.

There were other reasons he was glad for having done it, too. Learning how to work the finances had meant traveling around to different clubs to talk to the other treasurers. He’d noticed that the feel of the different charters varied a lot. Some were about family, others were more about partying, and some were basically a bunch of bitter, slightly too violent, ex-military guys. Or as he used to described them, ‘A club full of Bulls.’ Bull was their Sergeant at Arms, and he was a violent and pretty bitter man. Quite funny, though, and with a lot more humor than most thought. It was just well hidden between his growls and threatening looks.

After visiting all those other clubs, Mitch had realized that the Greenville club was by far his favorite. Not only because it had his dad as the president and his blood brother as member—even if that surely helped—but also because he liked the family feel and focus they had. To add to that, it had a few singles who all loved to go to the strip club and hang out at the clubhouse at night.

The incident with Hump had given him a new view of the club as a whole, though. It was one thing hearing the stories, and Mac had told him quite a lot about his time in Emporia, but to experience it had made him see things differently. Not in a bad way, just differently, and it had made him love his own club, and the feelings it gave him, even more. This was his family, and he would stand by them no matter what.

Violet, his brother's twenty-one-year-old, pregnant, tattoo artist wife, came through the door and smiled when she saw them. It had taken Mac less than a year to marry her once he got out, and he'd knocked her up as soon as she'd agreed.

"You two make me wanna vomit," he mumbled to Mac.

"You're just jealous," Mac said without taking his eyes off Vi, sporting the same ridiculous smile as she had.

"Insanely," he agreed.

He was. His brother had hooked up with Vi when she was just barely eighteen, and since then she'd been the only girl he ever looked at twice. It wasn't that Mitch wanted Vi, he just wanted to fall that madly in love with someone, or just to be as sure about something as Mac had been about Vi. He hadn't been close, though, and he had to admit he probably wasn't gonna find that kind of woman among the sweetbutts.

When Mac stood up and greeted Vi with a kiss while stroking her belly, Mitch laughed, "Oh come on! Now you're just rubbing it in!"

Neither of them even looked at him.

"I'm telling you, Vi," he continued, "you totally picked the wrong brother."

“No, I didn’t.” She turned towards him, still smiling. “Besides, Dad would’ve killed you if you tried what he did.”

“True,” he agreed with another laugh. Bear, her dad, would’ve torn him apart. He was a very protective dad, and Mitch was still surprised he’d taken it so cool with Mac. “Give me a kiss before you two leave, at least.”

She leaned over and kissed his cheek. He caressed her face and gave her one back, and then whispered in her ear, “Take care of him. He’s still totally gone for you.”

Mitch liked Vi, loved her even. She was a really sweet girl and had always been. He loved teasing his brother about her, although it wasn’t as much fun anymore since twenty-one wasn’t just barely legal. Although, twenty-one-year-old, pregnant wife still had a nice ring to it.

While Mac was doing time, her career as a tattoo artist had taken off, and she’d asked Mitch to help her with her finances. At the price of free ink when he wanted it, he’d agreed, and he was still doing it. It wasn’t that hard, and she was grateful—a good trade. It also meant he had some premium quality ink.

“Hey!” Mac protested and pulled Vi from him. “Get your own girl!”

Vi put her arms around Mac’s neck. “And you call me greedy.”

“Heard Lisa’s in town, is she coming by?” Mitch asked her.

“Yeah,” Vi nodded. “Tomorrow.”

“Get out of here and have some sex,” Mitch grumbled and waved at them when they left.

“Take care of her!” Bear yelled after the two of them. He was very much panicking about Vi being pregnant and probably would’ve preferred to wrap her up in bubble wrap in a locked, padded room until the kid was born.

Mitch emptied his beer, and then he got up to walk around the corner to The Booty Bank. He continued past the hang-arounds who were working as guards that night and inside into the familiar blinking lights. He found Sisco, their latest patch

Tommy, and a hang-around called Wrench in a corner and sat down next to them.

“Where’s the new girl?”

“In the back with Bull,” Tommy smiled.

“Fuck!”

Bull was always quick to get to the girls, and obviously he’d heard about the new girl and had been there to get first dibs. Autumn—Mitch knew it wasn’t her real name, and he preferred to not know—came over. He pulled her closer and told her to come and find him once her shift was over.

She did, and he took her back to the clubhouse and his room there.

-o0o-

When he woke up the next morning, Autumn was gone. Not much of a surprise; she’d been there before and knew the drill. He walked out to the bar and noticed Lisa at a table— with short hair! She’d always had long, blonde hair, and now it was really short. He could only remember that having happened once before.

“What the fuck happened to your hair, girl?” he yelled.

“Mitch! Get over here and give me a hug,” she yelled back as she stood up.

“Hey, doc,” he said and put his arms around her. “Let me look at you. Why short?”

“Long story,” she smiled. “Still breaking girls’ hearts?”

“Nah,” he kissed her cheek. “I try to get around to make sure they all get a taste. It’s my brother who’s making them devastated, all family man, you know.”

“Okay,” she turned around. “Don’t know if you remember her, but this is my friend Anna Dobronravov. We were friends in high school before she ran off to be a prima ballerina in New York.”

“Sure I do,” he said and smiled at the brown-haired, blue-eyed, pretty girl who looked as Russian as her last name

sounded. He didn't remember her at all. From what he could see of her sitting at the table, she had a ballet body—fine limbed and minimal tits. He took the hand she was holding out. “Mitch.”

“Anna.”

She was a ballet dancer for sure. She had a straight back and a long neck, and just the way she held out her hand looked like a dance move; the gesture was flowing. He immediately imagined her in five different positions that would take full advantage of how flexible she most likely was, and he gave her a big smile.

“Jesus, Mitch,” Lisa mumbled. “You really don't waste any time.”

“What?”

“Just go and get some coffee and leave us alone,” she mumbled. “And a breath mint!” she yelled after him as he walked away.

He was gonna go and get some coffee, and then sit down at the bar and keep coming up with fuck positions fit for a ballet dancer. Seemed like a good way to spend the time while trying to get rid of the hangover.

He'd been there for around ten minutes when Mac and Vi came in. Vi went over to the table with the girls, and Mac sat down next to him.

“Do you remember her?” he asked and nodded towards Anna.

“Sort of,” Mac said. “Lisa and her were in the same class. Think she brought her here a couple of times. Only half remember her since Vi talked about her last week. She's gonna do some ink on her.”

“Married or boyfriend?”

“I have no idea.”

He turned and looked at Mac. “You're a really shitty wingman, bro.”

“Like you care,” Mac laughed. “You’ve never used me as a wingman anyway.”

“No, because you’re a shitty one.”

That’s when the girls stood up, and Anna took a cane he’d missed hanging on the table and started to limp out.

“How the fuck can she be a dancer in New York if she can’t walk?” he asked Mac.

“She’s not a dancer anymore. Was in some accident a while back. She lives here in Greenville now.”

“Fuck. That rules out like ten of the positions I was gonna try.”

“Jesus, Mitch! You’re really an ass sometimes.”

“I’m not. I’m sorry about the accident thing, too.” He thought about it. “Gotta suck, she must’ve trained her entire life.”

“Nice to see you still have half a heart left,” Mac said with a chuckle. “Besides, she’s probably still pretty flexible and kind of pretty.”

“Yup. Think Lisa’ll introduce me?”

“Don’t think she’s one of the friends Lisa would ‘introduce’ you to.”

It had happened now and then that Lisa ‘introduced’ him to her friends. She’d never told him exactly what she said to them about him, but some of his best fuck buddies over the years had been her friends. Or rather, girls she knew. Her really close friends, what few she’d had, she’d told him to stay the fuck away from. He had a feeling he’d been her go-to guy when someone needed to get laid. She’d even called him a non-charge gigolo on more than one occasion, but if they were willing, hot, and horny—who was he to turn them down?

He actually preferred fuck buddies to one-night stands. He thought it was easier if the girl he was with knew what he liked, and the other way around. It was better, as long as they didn’t expect anything else, because it could get complicated if they did, but he generally got out of that, too.

“No, she’s probably not,” he agreed. She’d looked way to proper. “Guess they’re good friends?”

“Think so. At least old friends.”

He decided it was best to leave the subject. “How are Vi and the squid?”

“Good. She’s going up to Seattle for some convention this weekend.”

“You going with her?”

“No. They’re boring as hell.”

Vi went on conventions now and then and always came home with some prize and an offer to do guest work at renowned studio or two. Mac had followed her to few of them when she’d been away for longer periods. Mitch had no idea what the plan was once the kid was born, but he figured they had a plan. They always did; they were always overthinking stuff.

“Hey, wanna come over, smoke some pot, watch movies, and celebrate my birthday just the two of us while she’s away?” Mac asked.

“Absolutely,” Mitch smiled. “I’ll bring cookies.”

Mac’s birthday was the week after, and they always celebrated themselves a few days before. It was tradition. They smoked weed and talked about everything. Not just when it was almost Mac’s birthday, but whenever they had a chance. It had started when they were both still in their teens, and they still did it as often as possible.

It was during one of those weed sessions that the then twenty-four-year-old Mac had fessed up that he had a thing for Vi, a fellow member’s seventeen-year-old daughter.

And later, that they were seeing each other in secret while she was doing some art on his wall; how he was madly in love with the shy, purple-haired girl.

He’d told Mitch about all of it, every step of the way; when he knew he loved her, that he’d asked her to marry him and have his ink, and just three months earlier that she was

pregnant. It was basically during the weed-sessions that they caught up on each other's lives. Mitch just rarely had much going on worth mentioning.

“Hey, when are you finding out what sex the kid is?”

“I'll tell you on our session.” He gave Mitch a knowing smile. He fucking knew it. Mac had promised to tell him and now he was holding out on him!

“You know?”

“Yup, and she's made me swear that you and Lisa will be the only ones who'll know, so you better shut up about it.”

“Cross my half heart.” When Mac started to walk away, he grabbed him. “Come on! You gonna make me wait until then?”

Mac embraced him in a tight hug. “It's a boy,” he whispered in his ear. “And you *better* shut up about it.”

“You know I will.” He watched his older brother walk off, but halfway to the door he turned around.

“And she says you can be the godfather if you swear on your patch you won't use the kid to pick up women.”

“I would never do that!”

“Sure you would,” Mac laughed. “I know you, little brother.”

“I swear on my patch *and* my bike!”

“She'll be relieved to hear that.”

He watched his brother leave with a big smile on his face. He might not be actively looking for a girl like the one his brother had, but he was living family life vicariously through Mac. He loved to hear about it all, and he was so fucking thrilled about the baby it was pathetic.

-o0o-

They had church that Friday, and Mech and Mitch were the last two into the chapel, since they'd been working with some upgrades on the computer security. Mitch closed the door and

sat down at the end of the table, opposite Tommy, and lit a smoke. His dad banged the gavel and cleared his throat.

“I had a talk with Chucky the other day,” he started. Chucky was the president of the mother charter, and to Mitch’s amusement, he had something of a resemblance to the evil doll Chucky in the B-horror movies from the 90s. “They’ve been contacted by a Dutch club regarding a business deal.”

There was a tangible silence in the room. The prospect of branching out in Europe was both intriguing and worrying. Mitch didn’t know much about Europe or the biker climate there. It had never been much of an issue, since, as far as he knew, that was something that had never come up. The majority of the diamonds they shipped up to New York were sent over seas, but by then the merchandise had left their hands and it wasn’t their problem anymore. Sisco was the first one to speak up.

“Any club we’ve heard of?”

“I don’t know if I’ve heard of any European biker clubs,” Bull said. “Only the American clubs who’ve spread there, but no clubs that started out over there.”

“This is an American club,” Brick answered. “Smiling Ghouls. I’m sure you’ve all heard of them.”

“Aren’t they just a bunch of drunken losers?” Mace asked and looked at the others. “Or did I get that wrong?”

“Not entirely wrong,” Brick agreed. “But the reason they’re not really doing shit over here, is that they pretty much own the Netherlands, and they’re raking in big sums from there. The American side is living on the profit.”

Mitch immediately saw the problem with that equation. “So we’re gonna try to set up a working business arrangement with a bunch of drunks who tend to let others work for them?”

“No. Thankfully not,” his dad answered. “Two guys from the Amsterdam club are coming here. Not their president, but the VP and the SAA.”

“Why not the president?” Bull asked and sounded a bit insulted, which was understandable. If a club was serious

about something, they sent the president.

“He’s apparently not allowed into the US. I’m not sure about the details, but that was the reason,” Brick explained. “They’re coming over for a few months to discuss it further, tell us what they had in mind, if we’re interested. The idea was that they’d go to Englewood to talk to them first, and then they’d travel with them to meet with some of the other clubs.”

It was a no-brainer to Mitch that Greenville was on the list of ‘some of the clubs.’ They were one of the bigger clubs, and more importantly one of the border clubs, and Brick was the one who most often dealt with the cartel who supplied them with pot and diamonds.

“So we’re having two Dutch coming to visit?” he asked.

“One Dutch and a Swede, actually.” Brick scratched his head. “Chucky’s got his guys doing a check, but he wanted Mech and Mitch’s help, too.”

Mitch looked at Mech, who shrugged and nodded, then he nodded, too.

“Got names?” he asked.

“The Swede is called... Well, it’s spelled O-l-l-e, and Orn as the family name? Is that an actual name?”

“How would you pronounce that?” Bear speculated. “Like Olé, or Oll-e? Or maybe—”

“It doesn’t fucking matter,” Brick interrupted him. “The Dutch guy is called Dieter—“

“Obviously,” Sisco deadpanned.

“Bohm,” Brick continued without taking any notice of Sisco’s comment.

There was another silence before Sisco cleared his throat and, in a very controlled way, asked, “As in ‘goes the bomb?’” And then they all started laughing.

“There’s actually dots over the o in both last names, according to Chucky. Like in Motörhead,” Brick explained

and dried his eyes while he still chuckled. "I'll write it down for you, along with the other details I got on them."

"Thanks," Mech smiled. "I think I'll need it."

"I hope they have easily pronounced road names," Bull mumbled while he shook his head and lit a smoke. Then he nodded towards Mitch. "Find out what you can about the biker situation in Europe, too. They'll fill us in on it, I'm sure, but I want to know some of it before they come here. Don't want to have to rely on their say-so on that shit."

"Sure."

"Does anyone know anything about the situation in Europe?" Mac the over-thinker asked. "Aren't those mostly drunks on bikes, too? Like the Smiling Ghouls?"

"From what I've heard, they're insane," Bull said. "Kind of like Australian bikers."

"We'll hear them out," Brick said, and Mitch knew that would be the end of the discussion for now. "No point in speculating about anything now. Might not lead to anything, but I want all the info you can find. Chucky and Dutch'll come with them."

"Awesome, Dutch'll come with the Dutch, that's not confusing at all," Dawg mumbled.

The rest of the meeting was the usual stuff, and Mitch didn't think much about a possible cooperation with the Dutch club, simply since it probably wouldn't lead to anything. Suggestions like that one turned up now and then, and no one paid them much mind until it started to look real. They did all the background searches and found what they needed in case it took off, though. To be on the safe side.

Once the meeting was over, he went to find Mac.

"You sticking around?" he asked. Mac usually stuck around for a beer or two before heading home. Mitch hoped he might stay longer this time, since Vi was away. "Wanna head over to The Booty Bank, so you can see some non-fat chicks when you have the chance?" he added and wiggled his eyebrows.

“Fuck you,” Mac laughed, but he knew Mitch was kidding about the non-fat chicks. “And no, I’m heading home. See you tomorrow?”

“Absolutely. I’ll check out some girls for you and describe them in detail.”

“You do that.” Mac waved as he walked out.

Mitch emptied his glass and turned around to see which girls had showed up for the night.

-o0o-

Two days later, Mitch was outside the clubhouse. The birthday weed-session with Mac had turned into a drinking session as well. They’d toasted the unborn boy with whiskey. They’d also called Vi and given a half crying, incoherent speech to the Squid. She wasn’t too happy about that and had told them to drink water and get their drunken asses to bed.

He had a splitting headache and was resting on one of the picnic tables on the lot when he heard someone in high heels walking towards him.

“Gotta ask you something,” Lisa said.

He’d figured it was a sweetbutt and was a bit surprised when he heard her voice. He opened one eye to look at her.

“Unless it’s a life and death thing, think it can wait? My brain isn’t really with me today.”

“Yeah, Vi said you two called while pissdrunk yesterday,” she said, and he was pretty sure she was giving him an evil smile. “Are you still banging anyone who’s willing?”

“Why? You offering?” he smirked. He knew she wasn’t, he just loved teasing her. Lisa was hot as hell, but she was like a sister to him. They were the same age and had been hanging out since they were around six, so it really would be like fucking a sister. “Cuz I’ve told you, like a million times, it would be so cute if the two brothers married the two sisters. Our moms would die of happiness.”

“Oh, yeah, you stud, fuck me right now.”

“I don’t think I can.”

“I know.” That was definitely an evil smile. “But really, if she’s even remotely attractive, is that enough? I mean, are you still like when you were eighteen when it comes to that?”

“Pretty much,” he shrugged. “As long as I think she’s hot, that’s fine. Why are you asking?”

“Just worrying. I’m practically your house doctor, and I figured I should feign an interest.” She sat on the bench and leaned her elbows on the table next to his head. “How are things?”

“Besides the hangover, just peachy.” He closed his eyes again. “And you?”

“Good. Thinking about doing some research here in Phoenix.”

“Really? Miss ‘LA is the best place on the planet’ is thinking about coming back to ol’ Arizona?”

“Yup. I’ve been offered a spot on a project. It’s a good opportunity and what I want to work with. And I’d like to be closer to Vi when she has the kid.”

Vi and Lisa hadn’t been all that close when they were younger, but they were getting there now, especially the last few years. Vi was working on a flower garden on Lisa’s back, and even if he’d never been allowed to see the entire thing, what he had seen had looked pretty fucking awesome.

But Mitch didn’t think Vi having a baby was the only reason Lisa’d come home.

“So you coming here wouldn’t have anything to do with you cutting off all your hair. Seem to remember that the last time you did that was when that asshole dumped you.”

“That’s not it, not all of it, at least.” She swallowed. “Can I keep that talk in the bank?”

“Yeah.” He stroked his hand over her hair. “It’s kinda cute.”

“Thanks,” she smiled. “We’re gonna be the godparents, you know. Need to be close when you’re a godparent.”

“At least I’ll kind of have a kid with you then,” he chuckled. “I’m guessing that’s as close as I’ll get.”

“It is. Don’t pretend you’re sorry about it. You know we’d kill each other in a matter of months.”

“We would,” he agreed. “Probably in a matter of hours. It would also be a bit pervy.”

“Totally.”

“Hey, your friend, by the way, how is she?”

“Anna? Think she’s okay. Surprisingly okay, actually. I mean... she’s sad about it. Her entire family is all about ballet. Her dream was to become a principal dancer at the New York City Ballet. She used to talk about it when we were kids. Remember Mom saying that it probably wouldn’t happen, that you’d have to be crazy talented and lucky to get there.”

“Your mom is such a positive woman.”

Mel, his dad’s Old Lady, had been friends with Ella, Lisa and Vi’s mom. Once Bear and Ella got divorced, things the rest of them hadn’t known, or had only suspected, started to seep out. They’d seen that Ella didn’t get along with Vi, but it turned out she’d been mean to her, and Lisa still felt bad about that. She’d been her mom’s favorite, and she’d never defended Vi while they’d both lived at home. That was one of the things Mitch knew that the two of them needed to get over, and it was probably a good reason for Lisa to try to stay close for a while.

“Not really,” Lisa agreed. She still got along with Ella, who also lived in LA, but she wasn’t as quick to defend her anymore. “It’s the best of the best, but she made it.”

“She did?”

“Yeah. She was a principal dancer for years, and then she got hit by a cab when she was trying to get to the ballet in time for a practice.”

“Man, that’s gotta suck.”

“No shit.”

“So that cane, is she gonna be able to walk without it?”

“Probably not. They don’t know. My guess would be not. There’s a lot of nerve damage and a lot of nerves that were severed close to the spine. They don’t usually grow out when it’s so far for them to grow, and I don’t know if they managed to stitch them up. That doesn’t always work, but even if they did, I don’t think she’ll ever be fully healed.” It was always funny to Mitch to hear Lisa get into doc-mode. “But I think the fact that she’s so extremely disciplined by nature helps, especially with the physical therapy. Being on a rigid training program is pretty much her natural state.”

“I bet.” He didn’t know much about ballet dancers, but he knew they had to train like maniacs, all the fucking time, so PT was probably nothing to a girl like her. “Poor chick.”

“Are you really feeling sorry, or are you just planning on how you could turn it into a pity fuck?”

“A little of both,” he admitted with a smile, mostly to himself. “But really, I do feel sorry for her. Bet she’s a pretty stable person though, disciplined and all that, she’ll be fine.”

“Think so. Seems to have the right attitude.”

“Does she speak Russian?”

“No idea. Why?”

“Sexy language.”

In fact, he had a thing for girls who spoke any other language. Especially if it was their mother language because it was a special sense of achievement when you managed to fuck a girl so properly she forgot English and started to yell in a foreign language.

“You’re really a dawg. I bet that’s why you never got a road name. ‘Dawg’ was already taken.”

“Could be.” He looked up and noticed Lisa had a big smile. “So no prince charming around the corner for you then?”

“No,” she shrugged. “Isn’t it annoying? With Vi and Mac, I mean.”

“I know!”

“She was eighteen, for chrissake, you don’t meet the love of you life when you’re eighteen!”

“I’m with you.”

“Her first boyfriend, and he’s.... so fucking nice!”

“Very nice!”

“They’re so... fucking...”

“...Perfect.” Mitch agreed. They looked at each other and started to laugh. “Jealous?”

“A little. And here they are.”

Mitch turned his head and saw Mac and Vi coming towards them, so apparently Vi was home from the convention. She sat down on the bench next to her sister, shaking her head at him.

“I leave my Old Man with you for a weekend, and he’s a wreck.”

“Hey! I’m the impressionable baby brother, don’t blame me!” He turned to the side and put his hand on her bump. “How’s the squid?”

“Fine. It’s awesome being pregnant, no one gets upset when I say I need a break, they run and get me anything I want. Think I’m gonna try to stay pregnant as much as possible for the coming years.”

“Move over,” Mac muttered and lay down on the table next to him. “This is almost as bad as my bachelor party hangover.”

Mitch laughed. That had been one of the best parties he’d ever been to. Admittedly his memory of the later hours of that night were a bit hazy, but he knew he’d had a good time. He also knew he’d pulled a ‘Dawg’ and had taken two girls with him to his room at the end of the night. He’d said it was to take the bullet for Mac, since he couldn’t fuck a stripper that night.

As much as he teased his brother for keeping it in his pants, he’d be the first one having a go at him in the ring if he found out he’d been cheating on Vi. Then he’d hand him over to Bear.

Mitch and Mac were on the table, and Vi and Lisa on the benches. It was at times like this he really wished he did have the hots for Lisa, because they made a great foursome. Wasn't gonna happen, though. Lisa was high maintenance; he could sniff out one of those girls out in a second, and Mitch was not the kind of guy who could deal with a high maintenance girl.

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CHAPTER THREE

Doctor's Orders

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The first thing I noticed when I woke up was always the stiffness and the beginnings of a dull pain on the inside of my lower leg. The most badly damaged nerve was the sciatic nerve, which lead to numbness and pain in that area—among other things. It obviously meant that those muscles weren't working properly, and in the long run that could mean permanent stiffness, but I was trying to keep it at bay the best I could.

I lay still and slowly started moving my foot, stretching as well as I could to just get some blood flow to the leg. Then I sat up and started to massage the thigh, slowly continuing down the leg. Once the stiffness started to subside, I started stretching while still massaging.

Brett had given me a program to do each day, and I always did it. The full thing took about twenty minutes, but it didn't bother me much, since I'd noticed that the days when I shortened it or didn't do it properly, I had more pain and the leg worked even worse.

Once I'd gone through the entire series, I picked up my cane and went into the bathroom for a pee and a shower.

Irina was in the kitchen when I went in.

"Morning, Zvezda," she said as she handed me a cup of coffee. "Done with the exercises?"

I nodded and smiled. That was actually a familiar question, and she'd asked it every morning since I was six. Before the accident, my exercises were done in the ballet room down the hall instead of in my bed, but I liked how she still asked.

"Isn't it your day off?" she asked, and I nodded again while taking my first sip of the coffee. I wasn't working full time, mostly afternoons and nights. My boss, Richard, had told me it

might be more later on, but there was no need for it yet. Irina continued, “Anything exciting going on today?”

“Not really. PT and then I’m meeting Lisa.”

“That sounds pretty exciting to me,” Irina smiled, and then she sighed. “At least sounds a lot more exciting than my day.”

I was about to ask her what she meant, but she waved her hand and chugged down her coffee on her way towards her bedroom, so I assumed she was getting late. I looked at the overfull kitchen table with a smile. Time for breakfast—a big one! In general, I was starting to really see the perks about not being on a rigid schedule and diet. But I still missed dancing. Every day.

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Since seeing her at the clubhouse, three months earlier, Lisa had moved to Greenville. She was working on a research project about antibiotics in Phoenix, and we met quite often. It was fun—when she didn’t give long speeches about resistant diseases and their effects. She had a tendency to slip into her interests in that way. That was something she’d done even when we were young. She’d always been curious about stuff and eager to learn *everything*. Back then she’d argued that it was one of the reasons she got along so well with Mitchell Baxter, but I frankly had a hard time seeing him as being curious about anything but the insides of girls’ panties.

Another thing I liked about Lisa was that she wasn’t tiptoeing around me—about anything. She was one of few people who asked me about dancing and if I missed it. I still avoided the topic, but it was nice to know that when I was ready for it, I’d be able to talk to her. She wouldn’t ignore it or tell me to forget about it, to not dwell on it, or anything like that; she’d let me talk and she’d listen. She poked in other areas as well. Which was what she was doing while we were having coffee at a small local diner.

“Seriously?” she asked with her sandwich still halfway to her mouth. “Before the accident?”

“My body had to heal and... stuff,” I tried.

“Honey, that might’ve been true the first six months, maybe eight, but still. How long before the accident?” She looked at me, and I tried to avoid meeting her stare. “No bullshit, Anna. How long?”

“Six months maybe.”

“Jesus! Are you telling me you haven’t had dick in, like, two years?”

“Oh, wow! Thank you! Say that a little louder, I’m not sure the guy in the bathroom heard you.”

“Well good, maybe he can come out and take you back there for a proper fuck.” She did lower her voice a little, though. “But really!”

“I was doing a lot of big roles just before and... I don’t know. I guess I was busy. Besides, the guys at the ballet are quite often not on the market.”

“Gays?”

“Yes.”

“And outside the ballet?” she asked, and I looked at her with a lifted eyebrow. “You didn’t meet people outside the ballet?”

The closest I’ve ever been to be able to explain to others what life in a ballet company was like, was to compare it with going into a convent. I went to live at the school when I was fourteen, and I’d been living and breathing dance every single day since then. Once school was over, I’d moved into an apartment with two other dancers. It wasn’t as if I was a virgin, and I’d been in relationships, too. I’d even tried it twice with people outside the ballet, but that hadn’t even been close to working. The only truly serious thing had been with a fellow dancer, but he’d gotten an offer at a ballet company in Paris, and I had fully understood when he left. I would’ve done the same if I had been in his situation and had received the same offer.

“Lisa,” I started and then just... tried to explain what it was like. “Training started at half past ten every day. At twelve there were rehearsals for six hours and then the performance. I

didn't really meet a lot of people outside the ballet. Just when we had drinks with people who supported the theater and things like that."

"Wow. You must be dying for some dick."

"Sure." I cleared my throat.

"Okay, baby, I saw that." And when I looked at her, she was pointing her finger at me. "What was that? You're not dying for dick, why?"

"Lisa—"

"Are you gay? I'd be okay with it, you know. Wouldn't be able to help you since I'm really not. Kind of wish I was—I really like boobs."

"I'm not gay!"

"Then what?" She stared at me, and I could see when she figured it out. "Honey," she said in a low voice. "You know it's not gonna matter."

When we were kids, we talked about our bodies a lot, like most girls did. Lisa was beautiful, stunningly so, and she had a lot of curves in all the right places—as a man would put it. I looked like most dancers did, but at the same time we'd always had very different approaches to our bodies.

Mine was my tool; it needed to function and especially my legs. Lisa had admired my legs to the point where I actually liked them as well. My feet were something of a mess, like all dancers' feet are, but I'd still loved them—calluses and all—simply since they were a clear display of my hard work. My body fat used to be nonexistent, which meant I didn't have any curves to talk about and hardly any breasts. My legs, feet, and long neck were what I liked about myself. My legs were long and slim, but still muscular. With emphasis on *were*. Now, one of my legs was beautiful, the other—not so much.

"It matters to me." I looked down at the table. "Whenever I did manage to meet someone, especially if they were outside the ballet, they loved my legs."

“Bet they did. Having those things wrapped around your waist has to be something.”

“I love you, Lisa,” I said with a laugh. “Yes. That was it. And the fact that I could put them behind my neck if I wanted to.”

“With all the physical therapy you’re doing, I bet you’re still pretty flexible.”

“It’s not bad, but that’s not it. It looks horrible. There are scars all over it and marks from the nails that were pinned through it.”

She reached over the table and took my hand. “Honey, you’re a beautiful woman, and the fact that one of your legs is fucked up isn’t gonna matter.”

“Like I said, it matters to me.”

We sat in silence for a while, and then she looked at me again. “You gotta masturbate like a maniac.”

My coffee got stuck halfway down my throat, and I coughed so bad the waitress came over to make sure I was okay.

“Tell me you at least have a B.O.B.,” Lisa said once the waitress was gone.

“A what?”

“Battery operated boyfriend.”

“No. I’d die of embarrassment if I walked into a sex shop.”

“Anna, it’s the 21st century. The only ones going into sex shops are couples—since it’s kind of sexy—or people hoping to hook up with someone else who really needs some. People order stuff online.”

“I live with my aunt. Think she’d notice the package.”

“You are such a prude! I’ll take you to the sex shop at The Booty Bank.”

“No!” I did not want to go to a sex shop where I was sure to meet with people I kind of knew. “Not going to happen!”

“I’m not taking no for an answer. Either that, or you let me set you up with someone.”

“Who would you set me up with?” Not that I would do it, but I was curious about who she’d pick.

“Mitch,” she said without even thinking about it.

“Mitchell Baxter?!”

“Yes. What?”

“No. No way. He must’ve nailed half our school—the female half.”

“I know! Imagine the training he’s had. If it’s just to get laid, experience is a good thing.”

“You’re not setting me up and definitely not with Mitch Baxter.”

“He’s hot!”

He was hot. Very hot and very good looking, but I shook my head. I wasn’t comfortable at all with the idea that he would see my leg, or any other part of me for that matter.

“Honey. You have to choose, you might spontaneously combust if you don’t get some kind of penis—fake or real.”

“Is that your medical opinion?”

“Damn right,” she said with a big smile. “So what’s it gonna be?”

There was no way in hell I’d let her set me up with Mitch.

“Sex shop.”

Not a full hour later, we were walking towards it. To make matters worse, Mitch was sitting outside it next to a blonde guy in his late forties with a long beard.

“Lisa,” Mitch said and tsked when we came closer. “I’ve told you, if you’re aching I’ll set you free.”

“Such a stud,” she winked as she walked inside. I followed her, and I was probably bright red.

There was another guy inside, standing behind the counter.

“Hey, Wrench,” Lisa said to him. He had black hair and the most amazing blue eyes. If she’d tried to set me up with him, I might’ve agreed, but Lisa just waved towards the door. “Get out. Give us girls some privacy.”

“Thank you,” I mumbled when the door closed behind him.

Then I started to look around in the shop, still not moving. The shop was surprisingly... nice. It was bright, not seedy at all, and well organized. My eyes fell on the rack of stripper shoes, and I walked up to them.

“Can’t believe they’re able to dance in these.”

“This from the girl who used to dance on the tip of her toes,” I heard from the door and turned around to see Mitch standing in it, leaning against the frame. “I find that a little more impressive.”

I blushed again and turned away from him.

“Mitch! Girl time!” Lisa yelled.

“Girl time in a sex shop. I might cum in my pants.”

“Out.” She started to physically push him outside.

“I’m going, I’m going,” Mitch laughed and waved at me over Lisa’s head. “See you, Anna.”

When he winked at me, what Lisa’d said about him probably being pretty damn good and her wanting to set me up with him really got to me. I took a deep breath and turned around to look at the shelves with the vibrators.

If it had been before the accident, I might’ve tried because he was hot, but the cane I was holding onto reminded me of why I was in a sex shop, so I didn’t bother. Despite what Lisa seemed to think, I wasn’t a prude. I used to like sex a lot. We had parties for friends of the ballet on occasion and saying that you were one of the ballerinas pretty much ensured that you got laid if you wanted to. Flexibility was a good thing in bed, and I used to be able to be a damn pretzel if I wanted to. Still could, if the stretching at my physical therapy was any indication.

“If it helps, I can just turn around and you put whatever you want in your bag, and we’re out of here.”

“I’ll pay,” I mumbled, and my eyes fell on one that looked pretty.

I didn’t want one of those penis-looking things with veins on them, but that one looked almost like a rose bud in white and pink.

“Don’t be silly. Just take whatever you want.”

I picked up the rosebud one and put it in my bag. “I’m done.”

“Sure? Just one?”

I looked around again and nodded. I really just wanted to get out of there before Mitch or someone else came back inside. Or someone I’d really be embarrassed to meet in a sex shop, like Bear. Lisa reached for something and put it in my bag before hooking my arm and finally walking towards the door.

“Every girl needs a bullet vibrator. Once you do get over that leg thing, it’s great for sex with a partner as well.”

I laughed and kissed her cheek. “Thank you.”

“Doctor’s orders. You need to lighten up.”

When we came out Mitch was still sitting there.

“Can I have a look at that?” he asked, and for a second I thought he meant the vibrator and hugged my bag closer. He noticed and shook his head with a meaningful smile. “The cane, Anna. Can I see?”

“Oh. Sure.” I handed it over.

“It’s beautiful,” he said when he handed it back to me. “Where did you find it?”

“I didn’t. My parents did. It’s Russian.” I had no idea why I added the last part, but he didn’t seem to think it was odd.

“Do you speak Russian?”

“Some.” I knew what was coming, since it always did, and he didn’t disappoint.

“Say something.”

“What?”

“Something fitting.”

He was smiling, and I couldn’t help smile back. It wasn’t just his smile that was nice. He looked really good, with a full beard and slightly too long hair, both of which looked casually messy, but I was pretty sure it was by design. He had really nice eyes, too, so dark brown they were almost black, and his big smile was amazing.

This was actually the first time in a long while that someone had flirted with me, and I realized that I’d missed it. I couldn’t help myself when I smiled back and decided what to say.

“Ya khochu pivo i bol’shiye sis’ki”

“Do I wanna know what that means?”

“I want a beer and big boobs,” I answered and took Lisa’s arm. “We ready?”

“Hey! Say it again,” Mitch yelled behind us with a laugh.

“Were you flirting with him?” Lisa asked once we were out of earshot. “Because I’d set you up in a second if you wanted to. As long as you don’t expect anything else.”

“No! I don’t want you to set us up. But like I said, I remember him from school. That’s probably the only thing he needs to be able to say in Russian.”

She looked at me again. “Okay. But really, just say the word and I’ll hook you up.”

“You don’t even know if he’d be up for it.”

“He would. I know him and his taste. I bet he’s already figured out a few positions based on you being a ballerina. Trust me, he’d be up for it.”

While we walked back to the car, I was trying to decide if it was a good or a bad thing that he would.

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Irina was at home when I got back, and I could smell the food the second I opened the door—goulash. I went into my room and quickly hid the bag underneath my bed before going out to the kitchen. Apparently Lisa was right; I was a prude.

“Zvezda!” she smiled when she saw me. “How was your day?”

“Good,” I gave her cheek a kiss. “Yours?”

“Drama! All drama! They’re about to cast the parts for a new version of the Swan Lake, and everyone is on pins and needles. It’s a mess.” She waved with her hands while she was talking. “So fed up with them. And you know those men are the worst. They always talk about women bitching, but men are no better.”

I sat down at the table and hung my cane on the windowsill. As much as I loved hearing about it, it did bring back some memories of what that was like. I didn’t like the drama, but I missed that feeling in my gut when we were waiting to find out who got a part we all wanted. I’d had the lead in Swan Lake several times, and it was one of my favorites, since it demanded so much, both technically and emotionally. I especially enjoyed the diversity—the shifts between the innocent Odette and the temptress Odile—that was what really did it for me. I loved it, and the new head choreographer had done some amazing things with it. I firmly believed his fourth act of the Swan Lake was the best ballet anyone could ever see. I’d been so proud to be a part of something so amazingly beautiful.

It was demanding, though. It meant about a total of an hour of dancing of the two and a half hours that the show went on, which might not sound a lot, but it really was. When I was dancing the Swan Lake, I avoided anything that could be dehydrating, and I took potassium in the morning and at night to avoid cramps. I remember nagging about it, but I even missed those damn cramps. Those cramps and that pain was a

lot better than the pain and the cramps I had now, because there had been a purpose to it.

“How’s Violet?” she asked, as she put the casserole on the table. “How far along is she now?”

I was glad for the change of subject and took a deep breath to let go of the gloomy feelings.

“Not sure, seven months, or something like that. She’s fine.”

“And Lisa?”

“Lisa’s just fine. Her usual self.”

“Can’t she set you up with a nice man?”

“Tetya!”

“What?” she said with her hands up, still holding the ladle. “A man doesn’t have to be a bad thing.”

“Is that why you never had one?”

“I’ve had plenty of them. Never wanted to keep one, but they’re still nice to have once in a while.”

“Are you saying I should get a man, so you’ll get this place to yourself?” I teased.

“Maybe. Eat!”

“Just let me know, and I’ll spend a night at Lisa’s or something.”

“Or I’ll just stay with him.”

“Wanna tell me who ‘him’ is?”

I was actually thrilled she was seeing *him*, whoever he was, but I was mainly glad that we’d left the topic my nonexistent love life and focused on hers instead.

“One of the members of the orchestra. I’ll introduce you when I’m ready.”

“I’d like that.”

Later that night, I picked out the vibrator with a big smile. It had to be better than just my own hand and it was pretty. I

just hoped it didn't buzz too loudly; my room was wall to wall with Irina's. Although I guessed I had to be more worried about me being loud rather than the vibrator.

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CHAPTER FOUR

An Active Night Life

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Mitch was working on a car when he noticed Lisa pulling in on the lot. He dried off his hands and went to catch up with her before she went inside the clubhouse. He'd been waiting for her, but she hadn't been by all week. It wasn't really something he was in a hurry to talk to her about, but since she was there he'd grab the chance.

"Hey, beauty. Got an ask."

"Ooohhh." Her smile grew big, and she tapped her fingers against her chin in a contemplative manner. "Means you're gonna owe me."

"Yeah. I'll owe you. Gonna help me or not?"

"Ask me, and I'll tell you."

Lisa had always been an incredible tease. When he was fourteen and got a boner from seeing a bowl, fruit, hill, pillow, or pretty much anything in the shape of a boob, she used to 'accidentally' stroke her chest against his arm. He had to give it to her, though, she'd been very helpful when it came to make him understand women.

"The Ballerina who was at the sex shop last week, think you can give me her number, maybe address, and possibly put in a good word?"

"Mitch, are you trying to get me to help you do a 'cum and run' on my friend?"

"Hey! You let her loose in the sex shop last week, so I'd say she obviously needs some." He moved closer. "And you *know* I'm very good at doing that and letting her go on and find the love of her life. I've done that with your friends before."

"Do you even know her name?"

“Sure. Anna and some weird, Russian last name starting with D—I think it was.”

“Impressive.” She took a deep breath. “Truth is, I gave her the options of letting you nail her or a visit at the sex shop. She chose the shop. Apparently she very vividly remembers you fucking every girl at school.”

“Damn!” That was a bit of a disappointment, but at least Lisa’d had him in mind, which meant there was some hope.

“So why are you so interested?”

“Ballet dancer. Bet she’s flexible.”

“You nail dancers all the time. Got a strip club full of them, and I’ve been to it, those are some flexible bitches.”

Lisa’d visited the strip club a few years earlier, and that hadn’t gone over all that well with Bear. He’d been furious and had decided it was Mitch’s fault. Which it hadn’t been. Lisa’d asked if she could come, and he’d said yes, but despite Lisa defending him, he’d been on Bear’s shit list for months.

“Not the same,” he said as an answer to Lisa’s statement. He wasn’t sure how to explain it. “They’re easy, you know that, and they just love showing off how flexible they are. Once in a while I like...”

“Mitchell Baxter, are you saying you once in a while want an innocent girl?”

“Not innocent, but someone who isn’t a borderline hooker, and who doesn’t get down on her knees in front of me just ‘cause I say so.”

“You want some girl that not all of your brothers *and* you have nailed hundreds of times.”

“Something like that. Judging by the blush when she was in the sex shop, she’s a little innocent, she’s a ballerina, and pretty damn hot.”

“All this,” she swept her hands in front of him, “is of course *very* sweet, but there’s a small hitch. She’s a little innocent, and not all that easy to get into bed. Which means

you're gonna do your charming shit on her, nail her, and then leaver her behind crying.”

“I won't!”

“So how are you gonna get her to put out then?”

“I was hoping you'd pimp me out again.” She just kept eyeing him with her hands crossed over her chest, and he sighed. “So, no deal?”

“Tell you what, if she says she *really* needs some, I'll send her your way. No charming, just have sex with her—*good* sex—and that's it, unless she calls you again.”

“What do you want for that?”

“You'll owe me a *big* one. Not some little shit thing, a *real* favor, and I can cash it in whenever I want to.”

“Do I get her number?”

“Not today.”

“Damn, Lisa! You're a better negotiator than your dad.” He pulled her in for a hug. “I'll be nice and not hurt your friend.”

“*If* I give you a shot.”

He kissed her cheek. “I'll trust your judgment.”

They both knew that the only point with the conversation was for him to let her know he was interested, and she'd give him a go if she thought Anna could handle it. He'd never mess with one of her friends in a way that could hurt them. This was just their normal dance, and even if it had been quite a few years since they'd done it, it was familiar grounds for both of them.

With a smile, she walked away, and Mitch couldn't help himself.

“Hey, Beauty! Nice to see you still got it.”

“I'll never lose it,” she said with a wink, and he laughed. “And I gotta say, even taking into account that nice speech you gave me, she's not your type.”

“Why's that?”

“She’s pretty, but she’s no knockout.”

He thought about it. He actually thought Anna was a knockout, and she wasn’t that far off his normal taste. She was pretty, really pretty, and moved like a real dancer, which he liked. Once in a while he liked some class.

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“Chucky, Dutch, and the two members from the Dutch club are coming next month. And I’m guessing Sisco was right, and we’re all gonna have a problem keeping Dutch and ‘the Dutch’ apart. Either way, they’re landing in the US in two weeks, gonna stay in Englewood for a while, and then they’re coming here. So,” his dad leaned back at the head of the table and lit a smoke, “tell me what you got.”

Mitch started after a nod from Mech, “What could be expected on the two members. Did, however figure out that Örn, with the two dots over the o, means eagle in Swedish.”

“Eagle,” Sisco chuckled. “Tell me he’s at least tall.”

“He actually is,” Mitch nodded. “Anyway, both Mr. Eagle and Mr. Böhm have some priors. I’m mostly curious about the fact that Eagle did five years in Swedish prison for a drug-related charge that was considered a felony charge.”

“Five years?” Dawg asked. “You’re shitting me.”

“No. Apparently the most you can get for a felony drug charge in Sweden is ten years, and you usually only serve two thirds of that.”

There was a silence until Bear chuckled. “Think we’re operating in the wrong fucking country.”

“Yeah. Looks like it. They don’t really have life sentence, either,” Mitch muttered. He’d been pretty surprised when he’d realized that, and had sort of surfed off the tracks until he remembered what he was supposed to be looking for. “I checked Smiling Ghouls and their work in Europe. It’s one of the bigger clubs operating there, and the *only* one worth mentioning in the Netherlands. They pretty much own that fucking country, and they got their fingers in everything *but* diamonds.”

“So that’s what they want?” Bear nodded, so he’d probably suspected it.

“I’d say so. Amsterdam is the central hub for diamonds in Europe, kind of like New York is here. So I’d say it’s a safe bet.”

“Not pot?”

“No. Don’t think our pot is something they’re particularly interested in. It would be considered shit compared to the stuff they grow themselves,” Mitch explained. “They got suppliers for all the other drugs, and make their own chemical stuff.”

“Isn’t marijuana and hash legal there?” Bear asked. “Wouldn’t be much point for them to smuggle it at all.”

“It’s... a bit weird,” Mitch answered. “It’s legal at the front door, but illegal at the back door. Meaning, it’s legal for the coffee shops to sell for private use, but not for anyone to sell in big quantities to the coffee shops.”

“How the fuck does that add up?” Tommy asked.

“It doesn’t,” Mitch smiled. “And even without the pot, Holland is pretty much the continent’s gatekeepers to *anything* smuggled. Everything goes through there. They get the cocaine from Colombia, heroin from the Middle East, and the cannabis from Morocco except for the stuff they grow themselves. And the production of synthetic drugs in Holland has basically made it the Colombia of synthetic drugs. They supply pretty much the entire world.”

“And how the fuck do the bikers in Holland get away with that?” Bull asked. “Or do they have punishments in line with the Swedish ones?”

Mitch laughed. “I’d say so. Drug dealers rarely serve jail time, and sometimes they even get to deduct the expenses of their crimes when they pay damages. Like the cost for weapons.”

They all started laughing.

“Definitely working in the wrong fucking country,” Mace said and started to re-braid his beard, something he often did

when he was focusing. “What about what Bull said last time, about the European clubs being slightly crazy?”

“Yeah...” Mitch cleared his throat. “I read about some of the biker wars they’ve had, and let’s just say they’re not doing toy runs over there. They’re not even trying to seem legit most of the time.”

“How’s that?”

“Denmark was one of the first countries outside America with any bigger biker clubs, and today it has the highest rate of bikers in the world. During a Scandinavian biker war in the early nineties, a biker club raided an underground storage owned by the Swedish military and stole sixteen shoulder-fired anti-tank weapons, and they used them in populated areas to blow up clubhouses of rival clubs.”

“You’re shitting me?” Brick asked.

“Nope. Also a shooting at an airport, and I’m mentioning this because the Ghouls are big in Scandinavia. They’re the main supplier to the Freetown Christiania, a freezone in Copenhagen, the Danish capital. It’s an area in the harbor where hash and marijuana is legal.”

“Hang on,” Sisco interrupted him. “There’s an area in the middle of the Danish capital where hash and marijuana is legal?”

“I thought Copenhagen was chewing tobacco,” Tommy mumbled.

“It’s also the capital of Denmark,” Mitch explained before he answered Sisco’s question. “And yes. It’s like a society in its own, if I got it right. Sort of like a miniature Amsterdam but run by hippies. Bikers have been fighting over the right to the sells there forever, but currently it’s the Ghouls who do it.”

“Are the Netherlands and Scandinavia the major areas they operate?” Bear asked.

“Yes, some in Germany, too,” Mitch answered. “They work with a few other clubs, but I don’t think that’s gonna matter much to us. It’s smaller, local clubs with no representation here in the states.”

“Well,” Brick said and cleared his throat. “There are certainly things that need considering. They seem butt-fucking crazy over there, but I’d still like to meet them before I say something for certain.”

“Question is of course if it matters to us what they do there,” Mech shrugged. “Kind of depends on what kind of cooperation we’re going to have. Not like it matters much to us where our diamonds end up, and we rarely notice. We just ship the shit.”

Brick and Bear looked at each other while they nodded.

“We’ll think on it, and see what they say when they come here. I can’t do shit without the cartel’s okay either. I’m guessing they’re gonna want big amounts, so the cartel needs to be onboard, too.”

The rest of the meeting was even more farfetched speculations, which somehow landed them in discussion about Russia and whether they thought that the other Marauder clubs would be interested in setting up clubs there. As usual, they wrapped up the meeting with the financial situation

Afterwards, Mitch went to the strip club with Mace, Sisco, and Tommy. Mace and Sisco soon disappeared to the back rooms, but Mitch stayed there to talk a little to Tommy.

“So... you were a sniper,” he mumbled. “How good are you?”

“Good,” Tommy smiled.

He wasn’t the smartest guy, but loyal as hell, and he’d served in the Marines as a sniper. He’d gotten his discharge soon after he’d been hurt in an ambush where his friend had died. His leg had been mangled, but it was hardly noticeable anymore; he didn’t even limp. He was a good guy, pretty funny, and was built like a bull. His neck wide, loads of muscles, and close-cropped hair.

“How does that work? Do you just lie on your stomach and wait?”

Tommy laughed and nodded, and Mitch was just about to ask more when he felt his phone vibrating. He picked it up.

“Yeah?”

“It’s Mech. Did you just try to log on to our server while drunk?”

“No. I’m at The Booty Bank. You know, this bromance we’ve got going is really cute, but since I’m single—as opposed to you, Mr. Married My High School Sweetheart—I do actually have an active night life. That’s when I get laid, and I don’t log on to our server while getting a blow job.”

“Someone did, with your user name but the wrong password. Meet me at the clubhouse.”

“I’m on my way,” he said and hung up before turning towards Tommy. “Gotta go. Have a go at one of them for me,” he added and nodded towards the girls on stage.

He hurried around the corner to the clubhouse to see if he could catch someone trying to breach their security. He wasn’t too worried they’d manage, to be honest, but they needed to be on top of shit like that, and he sat down in front of the computers and logged on.

“How does it look?” Mech asked when he walked into the office twenty minutes later.

“Pathetic, and he’s still connected,” Mitch answered without taking his eyes off the screen. “Think my dad could’ve made a better attempt than this.”

“I’m not convinced Brick even knows how to turn a computer on,” Mech chuckled as he sat down next to him. “But they’re not even close to breaking through? Is he isolated?”

Mitch just gave him an eye. Obviously he’d isolated the guy to keep him from even accidentally stumbling into the important stuff. He wasn’t a fucking idiot. Mech just chuckled.

“I’ll start going through everything,” he mumbled. “Keep an eye on him.”

Mitch kept watching the intruder, who couldn’t be much of a fucking hacker if he didn’t even keep an eye on who else was connected to the system he was exploring. If he had, he

would've immediately seen that he wasn't alone, and it didn't take a genius to figure out you were being watched. This was by no means an elite hacker; he probably wasn't even a fucking script kid, because in order to miss the sysop in the system, he had to be a complete newbie.

It would've been easy for Mitch to just kick him out, but that was stupid. It was always better to observe than to interfere. They wanted to catch the fucker, and that was easier if they kept an eye on him, and this way they could control his access and see what he was doing at the same time. Also, just by watching him, Mitch would learn his technique and his skill. And this was an idiot. He was checking ports like a drunk in dorm hall banging on every fucking door he could see. No matter what fucking exit script he had to delete the log files when he left their system, there was no way in hell he'd be able to undo what he'd done.

Mitch sighed. "Look at this." He pointed towards the screen.

Mech rolled over his chair to sit next to him and stared at the screen for a few minutes.

"What the fuck? He's a fucking moron."

"Either way, we're gonna have to go through everything to make sure he didn't leave some shit behind."

"I'll call Lynn," Mech sighed.

Lynn was his wife, the high school sweetheart. Mitch still found it pretty fucking unbelievable that the two of them were still in love, but Mech claimed they were. He was never sweet to her on the phone, or anything like that, but he never cheated on her either. And he always called her when he needed to stay late at the clubhouse or had other work to do.

"Keep an eye on him until I come back. I'm putting on some coffee," Mitch said as he stood up. "We're gonna need it."

-o0o-

Mitch sighed a little when Eliza came walking towards him in the hallway at his dad's house. She looked angry, and he knew why.

“Sorry, buttercup,” he mumbled when she stopped in front of him and crossed her arms over her chest.

“I called you all night,” she mumbled.

“I know. I’ve been working.” She opened her mouth, but he interrupted her before she could say anything. “And it really was work. You know I pick up if it’s you even if there’s a girl there.”

“Work?”

“Club work,” he said, and leaned forward to kiss her forehead. “None of your business.”

Eliza was a lot like him. Not really thinking about things, a lot of energy, a brain that was all over the place going a thousand miles an hour, but with that lovely dash of teenage girl hormones. She’d been a monster for a while, but the last year she’d calmed down. Mitch found it hard to think about the fact that she was fourteen. He’d gone after more than one fourteen-year-old. It had been a while since then, and he hadn’t been much older than fourteen when he did it. Which didn’t change the fact that it was quite possible that someone, at that very moment, was planning on how to get into his baby sister’s panties. That was some disturbing shit.

Soon enough, the noise and all the people got to him, and he sneaked outside for a smoke. When the door opened behind him, he assumed it was Mac, but it wasn’t. It was Lisa.

“Give me your phone,” she said. He didn’t know what it was about, but he gave it to her. She pushed some buttons and then nailed him down with her eyes. “You have to be so fucking careful—I kid you not! Super careful, she’s... Careful!”

She’d given him Anna’s number! Things were looking up.

“I get it.”

“And really pay attention to her reactions and... Fuck! Just, *really* careful, okay?”

“Okay?” He didn’t fully get that but didn’t get the chance to ask her, since she just kept up with her ramblings.

“And if you make her fall madly in love with you, or say anything she can think means—”

“I get it!” he exclaimed, but Lisa wasn’t done.

“—I’ll rip your balls off.”

“Lisa. I get it.”

He took the phone and saw that Lisa’d programmed Anna as ‘Anna Dobronravov’. He was a bit impressed Lisa hadn’t just remembered her last name, but also knew how to spell it—assuming it was spelled correctly. He stared at the name for a while.

“So who is she?” his dad asked when he came outside a few minutes later.

“What?”

“Only time you have a smile like that is when you’ve got fresh booty in sight.”

“Maybe.” He looked at his dad and decided to go inside to give her a call. “Dinner tomorrow?”

“Always welcome, son. You know that.” He was about to go back inside when he turned around. “Any idea how someone got ahold of your user name?”

“No, but it’s not hard to guess, and no alarms go off until someone tries to log on with a username that’s correct.”

“So you didn’t give it to some booty?”

“Dad, I don’t need to give girls inside info to get a blow job.”

“Shouldn’t you be trying to figure who hacked our system?”

“Okay, they didn’t *hack* our system, they tried, and I am tracking them.”

“While you’re here?”

“Do you want me to describe exactly how I’m doing it, or are you gonna take my word for it?”

“Smart ass,” Brick said and gave him a hug. “See you tomorrow.”

Mitch went through the house, said bye to everyone, and then stopped once he was out at to the driveway. He pressed ‘dial.’

“Anna.”

“Hi, it’s Mitch. Lisa gave me your number.”

“Oh! I didn’t think...” There was a long silence. *“Hi.”*

“Wanna go out for a beer?”

“A beer?”

He was starting to wonder exactly what Lisa’d said to Anna because she sounded extremely confused. And something else, too, he just couldn’t put his finger on it at the moment.

“Yeah, thought I’d pick you up with my bike.”

“I don’t think I can go on a bike.”

“Nothing to it. I’ll teach you.”

“No, more that I’m not sure how to bring the cane.”

“Shit. Didn’t think about that.” He wasn’t sure what to suggest instead, and he was still wondering why she sounded like... a deer in headlights, whatever those sounded like.

“You could just come here. I have beer and wine, but I’m guessing you don’t drink wine. Probably something else to drink, too.”

“Okay.” He was starting to suspect that there was something he was really missing, she seemed very nervous, but he could go to her place. It beat taking her to his place by miles, since it was easier to leave than to throw someone out, if that seemed necessary once he was done. “Sure, uh, just give me your address, and I’ll be there soon.”

“87 Oak Street, fourth floor.”

“I’ll see you there,” he said and hung up.

He was still trying to figure out what was going on when he stepped out of the elevator in her house. This was one of the nice neighborhoods in Greenville, and he knew the house only had really big apartments, so he briefly wondered how the hell she was paying for that, since she couldn’t dance anymore. From what he remembered, ballerinas didn’t make that much money to begin with. The door opened, and Anna gave him a bothered smile. She was wearing a simple, black dress, something he really hoped was thigh-highs or stockings, and a white knitted shawl was draped over her shoulders.

“Hi,” she said and gave him a shy smile. “Come in.”

He walked inside and saw a long hallway ending up in what he assumed was the living room, but he wasn’t sure because the apartment was too fucking big for him to see the end of it. He walked farther and to a big opening on the right leading to the kitchen, the very modern kitchen, he noted.

“So this is your place?”

She laughed. “No. It’s my aunt’s place—my aunt on my father’s side—their parents bought this place in the forties. We all lived here together before my parents moved abroad.”

That would explain it. Not that Greenville was the most expensive place, but even here apartments like this cost a lot of money. And she was really cute when she was rambling out of nervousness.

“It’s nice. Better than any bar I had in mind.”

“I’m just not comfortable with bars.” She held up her cane. “Or more that I’m not comfortable with walking around with this when I’m drunk.”

“I can see why that would be a problem.”

She walked past him into the kitchen and opened the fridge.

“Beer okay?”

“Perfect.”

He took it and watched her as she walked over to a glass of wine she had standing on the counter. After a few impressively deep gulps, she put it down and looked at him again.

“What did Lisa say to you?” she said once she’d turned her eyes down on the floor.

“Not much. She gave me your number.”

With half a smile and a lifted eyebrow she looked up. “Don’t think that’s the full story.”

“No, but we didn’t talk much, she gave it to me at a family dinner.”

“You have family dinners?”

“Often.”

He was trying to figure out what the hell was really going on. Lisa was... well, Lisa. He knew how she talked to her friends about him. When she’d set him up with her friends before, it had been clear what was going on. This felt strange. Anna looked insanely nervous, and if she hadn’t been twenty-five he’d have considered her being a virgin.

“Are you okay?” he finally asked.

“Sure,” she answered and emptied her wine. She put the glass down and shook her head. “No. I can’t... do this. Feels like I’m... I don’t know, buying a prostitute or something.”

“Wow!” He laughed. “Should I feel offended?”

“No! God no!” She seemed mortified. “Just... she’s... I’m not sure what she told you, but she... Shit. I just... I can’t do this. It’s too weird. And I really appreciate that you’re prepared to do this, but it really feels a bit too much as if I’m paying you, and I can’t.”

Mitch was starting to feel even more confused, and Anna looked so ashamed.

“How is this like you paying me if I asked for your number?”

“You asked for my number?”

“Yeah, a few weeks ago.” He put the beer on the counter and walked up to her. “She didn’t tell you?”

“No. She...” Anna hid her face in her hands. “This is so embarrassing.”

“Babe,” he chuckled and removed her hands from her face. “I’m a pretty non-judgmental guy, so try me.”

“A while ago I admitted I hadn’t had sex in a while, and in a very drunk state I admitted that I found you... attractive.” She looked up at him. He’d kind of figured she did, since Lisa’d given him her number, but it was still nice to hear. “So she convinced me to do this. I somehow managed to convince myself that it was a good idea since...”

“...It’s been a while since you had sex,” he finished her sentence with a smile.

“Yes. And she *did* said you were a non-judgmental guy, so you wouldn’t mind my leg.”

“Your leg?” He was standing close to her, and she smelled nice and was so very beautiful. “What about your leg?”

“It’s pretty bad.”

“Okay.” He shrugged to show her it didn’t matter, but if he was honest with himself it kind of sucked. He’d had some great ideas on positions, but he’d go easy on her. “Just make sure to tell me if I hurt you.”

“What?” She seemed to realize how close he was and moved her blue eyes from his chest to his face before pointing it out. “You are very close.”

“I’m planning on trying to get a lot closer,” he mumbled. “So, what’s the problem with the leg?”

“It’s covered in scars,” and she was mumbling as well, suddenly very focused on his mouth. He reached out and put his hand on her cheek, stroking her lower lip with his thumb. Like scars on her leg would make any fucking difference. She was hot with or without them. “I don’t even like looking at it myself.”

A while since she had sex and not looking at the leg made it click. She hadn't had sex since before the accident, which had been a pretty fucking long time ago. No wonder Lisa felt that her home girl needed some and was prepared to throw Anna his way. He moved his other hand up and caressed her face, leaning closer.

"If you want me to leave, I will, but I'd really like to stay."

When she didn't protest, he pressed his lips against hers. As soon as she started to respond, he let go of her cheeks and wrapped his arm around her waist. With his free hand, he hoisted up her dress a little. Since she still wasn't protesting, he reached underneath it and grabbed her behind. The groan coming from her mouth made it perfectly clear how much she needed some.

"Get up, and I'll carry you to your bedroom," he said, and she jumped up with a very graceful leap and latched her legs around him. He reached for her cane, held it up, and smiled. "I'm bringing this. Just so you don't think I'm trying to make sure you can't leave your bedroom."

"Okay."

"Where to?"

"To the left, and then the right at the end of the hallway."

His hand was still on her behind, and when he moved it further down, between her legs, and he was really pleased when he realized that she *did* have thigh-highs. Anna closed her eyes and smiled. When he walked around the corner in the hallway there were two doors. He kept a close eye on her face, slipped the panties aside, and drew his fingers along her slit.

"What door?"

"Oh my god!" She leaned closer and captured his mouth in a deep kiss.

"Baby, what door?" he asked again against her lips.

She answered by pointing, and he walked through it and put her down on the bed. He took off his sweatshirt at the same time as Anna pulled the dress over her head. She was

stunning in nothing but black panties and thigh-highs so dark he couldn't see through them. He reached for her panties, and she arched up so he could remove them.

Leaning on one hand next to her waist, he held her chin with his other.

“I don't want to hurt you, so make sure you let me know if anything I do doesn't feel good.”

“Okay,” she almost moaned.

Letting go of her chin, he reached for the first thigh-high.

“Leave them. Please, just for now.”

He didn't answer but moved his hand from them and then leaned further down, taking one of her nipples in his mouth. His hand found the patch of hair covering her mound, and he let his hand travel further down. She was wet, so wet, and he groaned. He traced the outline of her breast with his tongue and continued down. He *needed* to taste her. This was another reason he liked the innocent girls. Going down on a sweetbutt was definitely not something he wanted to do often. He got them off, it wasn't that it was all about him, but knowing that pretty much every guy he knew had been there didn't really make him tempted to go down on them.

“What are you doing?” she asked, and when he looked up she'd raised her head and was looking at him.

“Going down on you.”

“You don't have to.”

“Would it be okay if I did? Because I'm dying to,” he mumbled while kissing a circle around her bellybutton.

“Yes,” she whispered.

He got down on his knees on the floor next to the bed, and she spread her legs wider. With a grip of her hips, he pulled her closer, and carefully rubbed his beard against the inside of her thigh. Most of her legs were covered by the thigh-highs, but he could see scarring on the inside of her upper thigh, and some of it even continued further and over her hip. He gave it a kiss before turning his head, and he moved his thumbs along

her folds before he finally dipped his head and gave her a long lick. She tasted amazing, so sweet, and he buried his face in her. So fucking good.

“Oh, shit!” she cried. “My god, Mitch!”

She kept moaning and mumbling as he sucked on her clit and teased her opening with his fingers before he plunged them inside her. He kept licking, sucking, and nibbling until he felt her coming around his fingers with another,

“Oh my God, Mitch!”

He got up to look at her and pulled his t-shirt off. Her eyes were closed, and she looked extremely relaxed.

When he lifted her higher up on the bed, she opened her eyes.

“Please be careful. I haven’t done this in a while.”

“You told me,” he smiled and gave her a kiss. “Don’t worry.”

“I’m not. If it’s half as good as that head, it’ll be marvelous.”

He’d never met a girl who talked the way she did. She kind of talked like she moved, graceful and with an ease but still careful, and he hadn’t heard her curse unless she lied about what she said in Russian and cursed then.

He kissed her while unbuttoning his jeans and managed to get them out of the way without letting her go for a second. He was especially pleased he managed to get a condom out of his wallet without halting the kiss. He rolled it on and then looked at her.

“Ready?”

She nodded and kept looking at him with big, eager eyes. When he reached down and positioned himself, she smiled. Then he pushed inside, and she rolled her head back with a moan and held still before throwing her arms around him and hugging him tight.

“Damn, you feel good, Anna.” He buried his nose into her hair. “This is so good.”

“Yes!” she moaned and wrapped her legs around him. “So good!”

He found it hard to understand how something so slim was so strong, because she was holding on to him with a surprising strength. He kept moving his hips, and she met his every thrust. Her hand grabbed his hair and pulled his face to hers, kissing him.

“Harder!”

“Jesus, baby!” He felt it; she was already coming—and hard! He kept looking at her and then slowed down, resting on his elbows next to her head. “You okay?”

“Yes,” she mumbled and nodded. “Don’t stop.”

He pulled out and smiled when she almost growled at him. “Turn around.” When she’d done it and gotten up on all fours, he held on her hips. “You gonna be okay on your knees?”

“I’ll let you know if I’m not okay. Get to it.”

“Aye, aye,” he chuckled and slammed inside her.

He’d never really noticed her ass before but now he took a good look at it and at him moving in and out of her. She got up on her knees and arched her back... at an impossible fucking angle and turned her head. Her arm went around his neck.

“Fuck, babe. That is so hot!”

He moved his knees in between hers and pushed them to get her to spread them wider before finding her clit with his fingertips. She was so wet, and with her legs spread wide, him rubbing her, she was soaking the inside of her thighs all the way down to her thigh-highs.

He folded her over, but instead of breaking the fall with her hands, she lay down with her chest on the mattress and arms stretched in front of her. The angle made them both groan, and he felt her pussy clenching around him again. He fell over her as well, leaning on his hands next to her arms.

“Shit, honey, I’m not gonna last much longer.”

“No. Not yet. I want more.”

He took a few deep breaths and tried to think of boring things, like cooking, folding laundry, and Mrs. Parks—his math teacher in high school who had an impressive mustache for a woman.

“My leg,” she panted, and he let her stretch her legs until she was on her stomach, and then started again, lying flat on top of her and kissing her shoulders. “Don’t stop.”

“I’m trying,” he said through clenched teeth.

Then it was Mr. Wright, his teacher in shop. He’d had a really funky smell and—god damn it her pussy was like a vise around him.

“My god, Mitch!”

“Babe,” he held on to her hands resting over her head, with his cheek against hers. “You do realize I’ll do this whenever the hell you want?”

“What?”

He kept pumping, and she held his hands so hard he could feel her nails almost breaking through his skin.

He stroked her ear with his nose and gave her earlobe a lick. “You’ll get more, but I’m gonna have to cum, or we take a break.”

“No break. Shit! Mitch, oh my God, I’m coming again.”

He hugged her tight, slammed into her and her smell, the sound of his flesh hitting hers, her panting, and the blood rushing into his head, that was it.

“Fuck, fuck, this is good, Anna!” he roared, and then he came.

They both lay still until he gave her cheek a kiss and rolled off her. That had been... really hot. Her leg seemed to be pretty okay, so he was definitely gonna have a go at some of those positions he’d considered earlier. She also seemed to want more, and he had no problem with that. He looked at her

as he tied a knot in the condom. She still had her eyes closed and a slight smile on her lips. He leaned over her and gave her butt-cheek a kiss.

“Don’t move, sexy. I’ll be right back.”

-o0o-

“God damn, girl,” Mitch laughed as he rolled down next to Anna. “You really needed some.”

It was the third time, and he was done. There was no way in hell he had a fourth in him. Although he’d actually thought that after the second, really long, go they’d had, and then he’d said he needed a shower. She’d followed him inside not long after, and that had been enough to get him started. He’d carried her out to the bed and they’d gone at it again.

“I did. Thank you.”

“Happy to help.” He threw the condom in the trash he’d moved next to the bed after the first time. He looked at her alarm clock, it was 3 a.m. “When’s your aunt coming home?”

“Tomorrow night. She’s at her boyfriend’s, and they’ll go directly to work from there.”

She’d removed the thigh-highs before coming into the shower, and the leg wasn’t half as bad as she’d made it sound. She seemed bothered when he touched it, though, so he’d avoided it. If she still wanted to see him, he’d work on getting her used to it. No point in pushing her further yet, since he figured just showing it to him was a huge step for her. He yawned and rubbed his eyes.

“You can stay the night... if that’s okay. I mean... I don’t know if that’s weird for you, but you’re welcome to stay the night.”

“Not weird at all. Not sure I’m in any shape to ride at the moment.”

He was pretty sure he wasn’t; he was exhausted, and he had no problem with staying the night with her. She seemed to know what this was all about, and just the fact that she’d mentioned it might be weird was enough for him. Also, with

her comments about it feeling like she was buying a prostitute, it was probably better to stay to make sure it didn't feel wrong to her the morning after. If it did, she might be reluctant to see him again.

Anna sat up and took a nightgown from the floor before reaching for her cane. Was she going to some other bed? If that were the case he'd go home. He didn't want to push her out of her own fucking bed.

“Where are you going?”

“I'm just gonna braid my hair and brush my teeth. I'll be right back.”

He realized he hadn't seen her with her hair loose and now it cascaded over her back all the way down to her waist. He also noticed it wasn't a plain brown like he'd thought, but instead a reddish brown, and it was completely straight. He watched her go, heard the faucet, and a few minutes later she came back inside. She was carrying a cover and a pillow.

“According to rumors I hog the cover.”

“Thanks,” he caught them both when she threw them at him. “Would've left and taken the cane with me if I woke up to you hogging the covers.”

“You can't joke about a crippled person's aid,” she laughed and lay down next to him but with her back towards him. “Do I need to set the alarm?”

“No.” He pulled her braid a little. “Night, baby.”

“Night.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Relaxes My Brain

-o0o-

I woke up with a pleasant throb between my legs. It had been... amazing, and he seemed to have liked it as well. When he'd gone for a shower, I'd looked down on my thigh-highs and had decided it was worth showing him my leg if it meant he'd give me a third time.

The vibrator I had gotten from the sex shop had sort of kick-started my libido, and in a very drunken state I'd asked Lisa how serious she was about hooking me up with Mitch. She'd obviously given him my number the next time she saw him, and I'd never in my life felt as uncomfortable as I did when he walked into my apartment. It was just weird all around, and I'd had no idea how to handle a situation like that one. A guy coming over when it's more than slightly implied that you wanted him there simply because you were insanely horny. To me that seemed pretty close to calling a gigolo. Mitch hadn't seemed to mind, though. He'd definitely not been judgmental, and he'd handled it all really well, mainly by making it really easy for me to relax and just enjoy myself.

I turned around, and he was sleeping on his back next to me, showing off his hairy chest, the slight circle of hair on his stomach with the thick line of hair—a line I'd heard called the Treasure Trail—disappearing under the cover and down to his crotch.

He looked good. I'd seen more than my fair share of really fit guys, but I liked this kind: a little less muscular, but still with a six-pack and defined hip muscles. He wasn't as extremely fit as the dancers I usually slept with, but then I'd never liked the extreme bodies most male dancers had.

Mitch had quite a lot of tattoos, though, and I hadn't really decided how I felt about those yet. Not that I had something against them, but he had *a lot* of them, more than I'd ever seen

on any one person. I'd noticed the big 'Marauder' ink on his back in the shower as well. They all looked really well done, so I had a hunch quite a few of them were Vi's work.

I looked at the alarm clock, and it was 10 a.m., which explained why my leg was in such a bad shape. By this time I'd usually done my training, and along with the work out the night before, it was worse than in a long time. I needed to do my exercises, have shower, and eat my breakfast. When I tried to sneak out of the bed, he woke up.

"What time is it?"

"Ten." I pulled a t-shirt over my head and reached for a pair of jeans. "Would you like some breakfast?" I really hoped he'd say no because my leg was close to cramping so badly that not even the cane would be enough to keep me mobile.

"Can't," he thankfully answered and rolled out of bed. I couldn't help staring a bit again. He really looked good. "Gotta get to work."

"Okay."

He pulled his jeans over his bare ass, and I looked around to find his underwear. I took his t-shirt from the floor and handed it to him, while still looking for the underwear, hoping to find it and have him out the door as soon as possible, no matter how good he looked.

"I have my sweatshirt, what are you looking for?"

"Your underwear. I don't want Irina to find them and come waving them in triumph."

He laughed. "I don't wear any, so you're safe, babe."

"Good. Not sure how I would explain that."

"You're twenty-five. Don't think she'd mind you having sex."

"God no! She'd love it. I just don't want to talk about it."

"Ahh," he put his arm around me and kissed my forehead. "I really have to go."

"I would've set the alarm if you'd asked me."

“I know, but it’s okay. No one cares about me being late. I just don’t wanna push it.” He looked around. “Shoes.”

I followed him to the door where he turned around and smiled at me. I tried to smile back, but the cramp in my leg made me hold on to my cane as if my life was depending on it. We stood in silence for a while until I eventually managed to open my mouth.

“Thank you. For... being nice about it and not making me feel like a john.”

“It was my pleasure. And you can give me a call whenever you want me to come by.” He kept smiling and had a really great smile, and normally I’d appreciate it, but now I just wanted him out. “No need to feel like a john about it.”

“Yeah...” I said with a tense chuckle. “Don’t think I’ll do that, but thanks.”

“Why not?”

“I’m not sure I’d be able to make a booty call.” In fact, I was damn sure I wouldn’t be able to do that—again. Even if I didn’t make the call the day before, it was still sort of on me.

He stood still and then his smile grew. “Since I’m not much of a gentleman, I *do* make those calls. Would you mind if I called you?”

I weighed the pros and cons. I wasn’t dating anyone, I doubted I would anytime soon, and he’d seen the leg. He didn’t seem to mind, and it had been *great* sex. He might not call again, but if he felt like it, I wouldn’t mind. Also, saying I was fine with it probably got him out of the apartment a lot faster than if I said no.

“I wouldn’t mind.”

I watched him come closer again, and he took my cane, put his arm around my waist, and then gave me a kiss.

“What would happen if I just took this cane and left?”

“You would have to find another booty call.”

“Not what I meant,” he laughed. “I just wanna make sure you’re not stranded if you lost it.”

“I wouldn’t be stranded. Just a lot slower.”

“Good to know,” he said and handed it back. “I *will* call you.”

“Okay. Now, go! I wanna have breakfast.”

“Girl really likes her breakfast,” he mumbled, as he turned around and opened the door.

“Girl had a grapefruit for breakfast for eleven years, she’s catching up.”

“Grapefruit?” He stopped and looked at me over his shoulder. “You’re gonna have to tell me about that.”

“I will. Go!”

He laughed, but finally left. When the door closed behind him, I stared at it for a while and tried to take deep breaths. I didn’t even try to make sense of what had happened or what I’d agreed to. Instead, I pressed my foot against the door at an angle to stretch the back of my leg to get rid of the worst cramps. When I, a while later, was sitting on the floor and massaged my leg, I decided that it had been nice. Even if he didn’t call again, I wouldn’t regret it. He was right; I needed that.

-o0o-

Three days later, I woke up sweating from a very erotic dream. Apparently a night of sex wasn’t even close to getting my libido back into hibernation. Rather the opposite, and now it was trying to make me catch up for almost two years without sex.

After work I met up with Lisa. I’d managed to avoid her, but she demanded to see me in her usual Drama Queen way. She was sitting in the bar and had ordered me a glass of white.

“So you’re avoiding me, and Mitch is giving me sneaky smiles when I ask him if he called you,” she started the second I sat down. “I’m guessing he called you and then proceeded to fuck your brains out.”

“Hi, Lisa! Did you have a good day? My day kind of sucked,” I said and took a few big gulps of wine.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, we’ll get to that.” She leaned forward. “He called you.”

“Yes. He did, and I felt like a female john calling a gigolo, I might add.”

“That’s really sad.” She held up her hand, rubbing her thumb and index finger together. “This is the world’s smallest violin playing just for you. But please, Anna, tell me you got laid. I worry about you.”

“Yes,” I mumbled. “That’s all I’m telling you, though.”

“That’s okay. I’m just glad you let go of some of those inhibitions.”

“Those inhibitions can be a good thing and save you some trouble.”

“When those inhibitions stop you from getting laid for over two years, they’re a threat to the human race.”

“True.” I had to admit she had a point, and then I started to laugh. “Either way, that’s all you’ll get.”

“All I wanted,” Lisa smiled. “So how was this a shit day?”

“Just in general. People calling, being asses, and the computer system didn’t cooperate at all.” I leaned back in the chair. “How’s your love life, by the way?”

“This doctor, who’s in charge of the trials, is all over me, but I don’t know.” She waved to the waitress. “I’ve tried the doctor thing. It doesn’t work. I’m too dominant, I just run them over, and that’s saying a lot when it comes to doctors.”

“Sure does.” She was dominant. I knew that, doing group assignments with her had always been hell when we were in school. It had always been fruitful, and had given me good grades, but was also a little like being paired up with a blonde Hitler or Stalin. “How’s Violet?”

“Fine!” A big smile spread on her face. “Thirty-five weeks into it, she’s fed up, her back hurts, she cries all the time, but

she's fine."

"Cries?"

"Hormones. She's sobbing about everything. It drives Mac insane, and Dad freaks out when it happens. When it all goes on at the same time, it's like watching some weird art drama installation."

I decided to wait to visit Violet until the baby was born. A freaked-out Bear was not high up on my list of things I wanted to experience.

"Is she still working?"

"A little, mainly finishing up customers with big work, and she does it in short sessions. Sami and Trixie are totally freaking out. They think she's gonna have the baby on the floor at the studio."

"She could," I said. "Talk about being a born tattoo artist. How did she get into that by the way? She told me she was just sixteen when she started."

"Mac. They talked, she said she didn't know what to do with her art, and he just suggested it. A few years later she inked him, they fell in love—all very sweet and romantic in a slightly nauseating way."

"Bet your mom just loved that." Lisa's mom, Ella, was... special, I guess would be the diplomatic way to put it. She was nice as long as you went along, and if you didn't, she was a bitch.

"Hated it. Especially the part about Mac. She was not the happy camper at the wedding. Didn't matter, since everyone else was. Mel bawled her eyes out. Think even Dad shed a tear or two."

I found that very hard to believe. I liked Bear, but at the same time he still scared me a little. Not as much as the guy called Bull, because he terrified me. The fact that Lisa'd said I should stay far away from him hadn't helped at all, and I was usually pretty good at dealing with imposing men. There was just a huge difference between a man being imposing in

general, and standing in front of a man who you were pretty sure had killed a few people.

“Guess it all worked out for the best,” I smiled. “How’s the research going?”

Getting her to talk about her work was usually a fail-safe way to get her to completely forget about me, and it worked like a charm this time, too.

-o0o-

Irina was in the living room in front of the TV when I came home, which was an unusual thing. None of us were much for TV, and we mostly used it to watch movies on DVD. I’d never really had time for it, so I’d never developed the TV addiction that some people seemed to have. It had changed slightly after the accident, with the long days walking around at home with not much to do, but it was still usually movies, and some series. But that, too, was only on DVD because I couldn’t stand TV commercials.

When Irina noticed me, she turned down the volume.

“Zvezda,” she said with a smile. “Have some tea and watch this horrible movie with me.”

I sat down on the couch next to her, put the cane on the small shelf underneath the coffee table, and leaned back.

“Why are you watching a horrible movie?” I asked.

“Relaxes my brain.” She poured me a cup of gunpowder tea and handed it to me. “How would you feel about working at the ballet?” she asked.

“Not yet, Tetya,” I said and shook my head. How would I feel about it? It would break my heart to see it and not being able to do it. “I’m not ready.”

“When you’re ready, let me know. I might be able to pull some strings for you.”

I had no idea what they wanted me to do, or what they even thought I could do, but just the thought of walking in there made my throat hurt. Irina must’ve noticed, and she took my hand but thankfully didn’t say anything. We sat there a

while, and then, after a few mumbled words, I took my cup and went to my room.

As soon as the door closed behind me, the first tears came. Sometimes it truly hit me—I would never dance again. I had made a split-second mistake, that was it, and I was paying for it for the rest of my life. The thing I loved more than anything was something I couldn't do anymore.

I sat down in my armchair, sobbing but trying to keep it low, since I didn't want Irina to come in. When my phone rang, I considered not answering, but thought it might be good, something to take my mind off things, so I picked it up while wiping the tears out of my eyes.

“Anna.”

“*Hey, babe,*” It was Mitch, and I smiled. Maybe that was what I needed to feel better right now. “*What are you doing?*”

“Drinking tea.”

“*Drinking tea on a Saturday night. Such a good girl.*”

“I had wine earlier,” I tried to defend myself.

“*Don't try, I know you're a good girl. What's wrong?*”

“Nothing. Why do you ask?”

“*You sound... you okay?*”

“I'm fine. You?”

“*I'm good. Your aunt home?*”

“Yes.” I thought about it for a few seconds. Irina took sleeping pills, so she'd be out like a light in about an hour. “I could come to you in an hour or so.”

“*Want me to pick you up?*”

“Mitch, I still have a cane, and I'm gonna be stuck with it for quite a while.”

“*Fuck, keep forgetting that. Okay, I'll text you my address, and I'm gonna go home and clean up.*”

“I'll see you then.”

I hung up, and half a minute later he texted me the address.

After Irina had said goodnight, I waited another half an hour before leaving. It wasn't that she would mind, I just didn't want to try to explain what I was doing because I wasn't sure myself, and at the moment I didn't want to hear why it was stupid. Or she might get eager about me seeing a guy, and then I had to explain that I wasn't 'seeing' anyone, I was having sex with someone.

Mitch lived in one of the older apartment buildings on Main Street, not that far from the clubhouse. When he opened the door, my jaw hit the floor. It was a bright, modern, and really nice place. Along the right wall in the hallway was a staircase I assumed led up to a loft. To the left was a glass wall, overlooking a really nice terrace. His place was on the top floor, and the view from the terrace must have been great. I was stunned.

"Wow!" I mumbled and looked through the window. "When you said you needed to clean up I assumed you were living in some stud pad."

"No. Dad has a thing for interior design and big open areas. I'm the same."

The hallway, kitchen, and living room were on the main floor, open all the way through. I stood and stared for a long time, and then Mitch was in front of me, lifting me up and kissing me.

"So I was thinking," he smiled against my lips, "would it be okay if I tested that famous ballerina flexibility today?"

"It would," I laughed. "I'll see if I can help you."

Not ten minutes later, I was on my back in his bed, holding my good leg straight against my shoulder with Mitch lying on top of me. When it got uncomfortable, simply since his weight was pressing my knee against my shoulder, I moved the leg to the side of my body, hooking my arm around it.

"Babe," he chuckled, gave me a kiss, and put his hand on my ankle. "I really hope I get to booty call you for a while."

"Please do."

His thumb hit my clit, and I was already on my way to my first climax. He was so good at this it was ridiculous. Sure, I had a lot of pent up sexual energy, but it was still a lot for him. I figured Lisa'd been right, and that the amount of practice had something to do with it. Which meant that as far as fuck buddy went, he was a very good choice.

When the spasms subsided, I opened my eyes, and Mitch was smiling at me.

“I changed my mind, you're way too hot to be a good girl.”

“I *am* a good girl,” I insisted.

“Sure you are.” He gave me a kiss. “Want me to fuck you from behind?”

“Yes,” I laughed.

A very good fuck buddy.

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Not only did he have the technique, he had the stamina, too. I was soaked in sweat and very satisfied, and despite his continuous comments about my ballerina flexibility, I actually hadn't thought about dancing while I was at his place. I still wanted to go home and spend the night in my own bed, though. There was no way in hell I'd be able to get home the next morning without stretching, and I didn't want to do that at his place.

“Can I borrow your shower?” I asked as I got up.

“Sure. Bathroom door is in the living room.”

I brought my clothes with me, and couldn't help looking around a little on my way there. I was still surprised about the apartment. It was so nice and not at all what I had expected. I giggled a little when I opened the door to the bathroom. It was state of the art and *very* fancy. It seriously looked pimped; like he'd had an actual interior decorator there to place all his bottles in a way to make it all look perfect.

The next laugh was when I entered the shower and noticed the shampoo and conditioner. My suspicions about his 'casual' hairdo being carefully maintained seemed to be correct

because his choice of hair products were top of the line. In fact, everything I saw in there, that I recognized, was expensive stuff. To the point where I was worried if it was really okay if I used it.

Mitch was in the kitchen, still naked, when I came back outside.

“I borrowed some shampoo and conditioner.”

“Borrowed?” he asked with a raised eyebrow. “Planning on giving it back?”

“Okay. I *used* some of your shampoo and conditioner.”

“I assumed you would when you asked if you could *borrow* my shower.” He watched as I started getting dressed. “You’re leaving? You don’t have to.”

“I wanna get back before Irina wakes up.”

“You make me feel like a john when you just take off like that,” he said with a wink and held my cheek.

“Guess we’re even, then.”

He laughed and gave me a kiss. “Let me know if you have your place to yourself. Not promising I can always come, but if I can, I will.”

I’m not stupid, so I was fully capable of seeing what he was doing. He wanted me to take the initiative, even if it was in that kind of backwards way.

“I’ll do that.”

He followed me to the door, still buck-naked, which was pretty nice, and I heard him lock the door behind me.

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The next afternoon I was having my physical therapy, and while Brett was stretching my leg, he winked.

“Are you seeing someone, missy? You have a very interesting glow about you.”

“No I don’t!” I glared at him. “Seriously, how did you know?”

“Actually, I saw you get into a cab just down the block when I got home last night. And no one who gets into a cab in a residential area that late has been up to anything good.”

“So why did *you* get home that late?” I countered.

“Good girl,” he said with a wink, and started to massage my leg. “Want me to change the subject?”

“Yes, please!”

“I was going to ask you if you could change your lunch appointment on Thursdays to a morning appointment. I have a new patient, and we’re having some problems fitting him in. He’s only in town once a week, and can’t be here that early.”

“I’m fine with that, but why can’t he have PT in his hometown?”

“He lives in the middle of nowhere, and they stock up here in Greenville once a week, but I’ll let him know that it works for me. He wanted appointments around lunch. And as a thank you, I’ll even throw in a free ride with me here.”

“That would be great,” I said and took a deep breath when he started to flex my foot because it tended to hurt a lot, and it did this time as well. “Means I don’t have to take the bus.”

“You could drive, you know,” he said and started to pull my leg while still flexing the foot.

“I don’t have a car, and I can’t afford one.” I inhaled sharply. “Damn!”

“Sorry.”

“I don’t trust that leg, either, and that’s the leg you brake with. It wouldn’t be good if it stopped working or something.”

“It’s not gonna stop working all of a sudden, honey.”

“I’ll think about it.”

I had thought about it, though, and I didn’t want to take any chances until I fully understood how my leg worked. It had been a long time, but it was still a mystery to me. Also, I hadn’t been driving much. I had a license, but I’d never

bothered with driving in New York, and I honestly couldn't remember the last time I was behind the wheel.

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CHAPTER SIX

Do It Here

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Mitch quickly concluded that the very tall man who looked like the Viking equivalent of a psychopath, was probably the Swedish man named Olle Örn. He had a lot of gray in his beard and hair, ice blue eyes, a big nose, and really good teeth. For a second he wondered if they were dentures because they were so straight and white. He also had something shoved up under his upper lip, making it stand out in a weird way.

Dieter ‘Pico’ Böhm was shorter, had a moustache, hair pointing in all directions and only held down with the help of the military cap he’d put on the second he got off the bike. It was obvious he was in charge because Olle waited until Pico was ready, and then walked behind him up to Brick.

“An honor,” Pico said in broken English. He definitely had an accent; that much was obvious even by those two words alone.

“Yes, an honor,” Eagle said next, and his English was better. “We’ve heard a lot about you.”

After greeting Brick, Bear, and Bull, they shook hands with the rest of them. Eagle actually introduced himself as Eagle. Apparently the English translation of his last name had stuck among the Marauders.

Dutch took Mitch to the side after a tight hug.

“How are things with hacking attempt?” he asked.

“Nothing to worry about,” Mitch assured him. “He’s hidden his tracks, but he didn’t get anything. We’re doing a search in the system, and so far it’s clean. He’s been back a few times but hasn’t been any more successful, and he’s very careful, so we’re considering giving him a honeypot.”

“A what?”

“A trap. We’ll basically make him think he’s found what he’s looking for. He’ll hack it and that way we can track him.”

“I like it,” Dutch smiled. “Think it’s cops?”

“No. Not even cops suck that bad at hacking. This is something else.”

“Could it have something to do with them?” He nodded towards the guest.

“Doubt it. Their intel guy is a man called Staccato. If he’d wanted to test us, he would’ve done a better job, and if he’d wanted to get into our system, he would’ve. We might have caught him, but he’d get in.”

“And the emails, think he can get to those? The hacker, I mean.”

“We have programs that encrypt emails on all club computers, Dutch. I’ve told you that, at the same time as I told you that unencrypted emails are about as private as postcards. Don’t worry.”

“Oh. Yeah. That’s why I only email you from the club computer. Anything you and Mech have seen before? What he used.”

Mitch laughed. “Sure. But we’ve seen most of it. He was probably trying to add some rootkit, get sudo access—”

“Fuck it,” Dutch laughed. “I don’t give a shit, and I don’t get it, either, but we need to keep an eye on it.”

“We are. We’ve just temporarily hit a wall, but our system is clean. It’s almost like he’s just poking us with a long stick. He doesn’t even seem to be trying very hard anymore, but we’ll get him.”

“Glad you and Mech are on our side,” Dutch said with a smile. “Take me to the bar.”

After a few welcome beers, they all went into the chapel, and Mitch sat down at his usual place. They’d put out extra chairs for Chucky, Dutch, Pico, and Eagle. Brick held his usual welcome speech to their guests, and then they quickly got down to business.

“I’m letting Eagle here speak for me,” Pico said with a nod towards the huge Swede. “His English is better.”

He looked at Eagle, who nodded. Before starting to talk, he took something out from under his upper lip, put it in the lid of a small, round canister, before opening it and once again shoving something black under his lip. Mitch just stared, and Eagle smiled at him.

“Swedish snus, twice as much nicotine as those fag sticks your suckling on. Puts hair on your chest, boy. Want some?”

Mitch shook his head. “Um, are you gonna need something to spit in?”

“Nope. Not from this.”

Mitch still didn’t think it was smart to put that shit in before he started talking, but it wasn’t his problem, so he shrugged.

“We’ve heard that you immediately guessed we wanted diamonds from you, which is correct,” Eagle smiled. “But we do also want pot. We’re growing our own, but we’re in control of most coffee shops in Amsterdam and Rotterdam now, and we can just barely cover our own needs, so we’ve decided to keep our own production in Holland, and smuggle in foreign products to ship to the rest of Europe.”

“I don’t need detailed answers to my questions, and if I step out of line, just let me know, but I do have some practical questions,” Brick said. “I’m assuming you’re taking things through the US already, so do you have a port here where we can ship things from?”

They’d all assumed that it was going to be done by ships. If the Smiling Ghouls were in control of outlaw activity in the Netherlands, they had contacts in the Amsterdam and Rotterdam ports, or were even partly in control of them. A quick look at what cities the Smiling Ghouls had in the US, it became fairly evident that they tended to choose cities with important ports.

“We have a few,” Eagle said with a smile. “Since these things are going to Europe, they’re going from the East Coast.

One problem could be that you're muling on a small scale. You do it often and small shipments. That's not going to work with the way we're transporting."

"If we get to that point, we'll figure it out," Chucky said with a nod. "Setting up a transport company and a few trucks re-built for smuggling doesn't take long, but we're not going to start with that until we know where this is going."

"What would our role be, exactly?" Brick asked.

"Your roll would be getting the goods to a harbor here in the US, probably New York, and setting up the deal with the cartel. You already have a good pipeline of clubs up there, and I don't see any reason why you should create a different one," Eagle said. "You leave it to our men, get your cut, and they ship it over to Amsterdam to distribute it in Europe. It wouldn't be that different from what you're doing now. Just a bigger risk, since it's bigger amounts."

"Even if the pipelines are the same, we're not going to be able to do it in the same way as we are now, if the shipments get bigger," Bear said and shook his head. "So what pipelines we have now doesn't really matter. Might be better to use one further south. Shorter travel distance."

"I think our US friends will insist on the New York Port," Eagle answered with a casual shrug, but Mitch couldn't help noticing his tense jaw when he said it. "But that's something we can discuss later. And you can separate the shipments. Take the regular ones one way, and ours another way. That's up to you. We don't care either way.

"What about borders on your end?" Tommy asked. "This is just me being curious, but there's a lot of small fucking countries in Europe, a lot of borders to cross."

"It's the EU," Eagle smiled, and he seemed a lot more comfortable with that discussion. "No borders is the EU. Haven't seen a manned station at a border in ten years. It's trickier if you're going outside EU, but not even that is much of a problem if you know the right routes."

“You can come and we show you,” Pico said to Brick and Bear. “Or anyone else who wants to see.”

“They’ve invited us to come with them on a run if we set this up,” Chucky explained. “Think it would be a good thing to go on the first run. If for no other reason than to see Christiania.”

Eagle chuckled. “You wanna see it and the coffee shops in Amsterdam, too.”

They talked for hours, and it was definitely interesting. As far as Mitch could tell, the two visitors were straight with them. The only strange thing was the weird Swedish idioms Eagle kept using. Apparently he wanted them to spread around the word. The weirdest was definitely ‘shitting in the blue cupboard,’ which basically meant stepping over the line. Mitch liked it, though.

Once the meeting was over, Mitch called Anna. They’d seen each other at least twice a week the past month, and he still hadn’t managed to get her to stay the night at his place. She kept blaming her aunt or starting work early the next morning, but he was sure that wasn’t it.

He promised Dutch they’d sit down with Sisco the next day to go over what the cooperation with the Europeans could mean for the money laundry, but even after a quick talk he knew they were all on the same page. It would make it easier.

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“You know, if you were a seventeen-year-old high school girl, I might have believed the excuse that you don’t want your aunt to know you’re having sex, but you’re not,” he said to Anna while she was getting dressed. He was still in bed, and he was studying her while having his post-coitus smoke. “So tell me what the real reason is.”

“The leg,” she said without looking at him while she buttoned up her shirt.

“I’ve seen your leg, baby. Quite fond of it, to be honest.”

She sighed and eyed him. “I need to do a twenty-minute exercise every morning to get it started.”

“So?” he shrugged. “Do it here, not like I’d mind.”

“It’s just...” she didn’t continue.

“It’s okay.” He got up from the bed and went over to her cane. “Did you know that the cane got popular among wealthy men in the 18th century since swords became banned? It was used as a protection, and also something that showed you didn’t make a living by physical labor.”

“No,” she laughed. “How did *you* know that?”

“Read it somewhere,” he said as he handed it to her. “I remember what I read.”

“Everything?” she asked with a smile.

“Most of it.”

“So you could give me useful information about random subjects then?”

“Probably.” He followed her down the stairs and to the door. “Just so you know, I wouldn’t mind. I’d even help with the massage.”

“I need an actual massage, not foreplay.”

“I could do that before getting to the foreplay.”

“Sure,” she said with an eye roll and pulled him down for a kiss. “I’ll see you.”

“Whenever you can, just give me a call,” he said with a smile, well aware that she wouldn’t. It was always him making the call. On occasion she texted to let him know her aunt was staying at her boyfriend’s for the night, but that was as close as she’d get.

Once she was gone, he tried to get some sleep but quickly realized it wouldn’t happen. If he’d stayed in bed when Anna left, it might’ve worked, but getting out meant he was doomed. He was pretty pleased when Eliza called.

“Buttercup,” he answered with a big smile. “Was actually hoping you’d call.”

“*You free?*” she asked.

“Always free for you, honey. I’ll be there in twenty.”

He loved taking rides with Eliza. She was easy company and as sharp as she was beautiful. They always had great discussions about physics, comics, or movies. Lately she’d been asking him about boys, too, and as fucking uncomfortable as it made him, he was glad she talked to him, so he could warn her about guys like him.

A few months earlier, he’d been pulled over by the cops when they were on one of their night rides, and to his horror the cops had thought she was with him—as his girlfriend. They were probably looking to take him in for being with a minor. He’d been so disgusted he’d barely been able to look at her for about an hour after that. He was twelve years older than her! She’d naturally thought it was hilarious, and had teased him relentlessly about it for weeks.

This time there were no cops in sight, though, and after about a forty-five minute ride, he took her to his place. She took his hand when they walked into the living room.

“Sorry if I interrupted you,” she said.

“No you’re not. You’re never sorry, Buttercup.” He gave her forehead a kiss and went to get a Coke each for them. “And she’d already left when you called.”

Eliza was studying him when he came with the bottle and glasses. He knew he’d said too much because Eliza didn’t miss stuff. At the same time he needed to sort some things out, and with the exception of Mac, Eliza was the best option. Besides, Eliza was lacking the thing that made him and Mac scratch their head about women—a penis.

“You had a girl *here*?”

“Yeah, but she doesn’t want to spend the night,” he said, and Eliza raised her eyebrows. “Can you shut up about this? I don’t want it blown out of proportion because you yap about it to Mel or someone.”

“If you shut up about a few questions I have.”

“Okay.”

“It’s about a guy.”

He took a deep breath. She was fourteen; it couldn’t be that fucking bad, and if it was he’d go bury the little prick somewhere in the woods and make sure Eliza never knew about it. He really would, and Mac would help him.

“Ask me.”

“It’s this guy at my school. He’s older than me, and we’re texting. He’s really sweet and funny.”

Mitch bet he was sweet, but just emptied his glass to not say anything.

“So,” Eliza continued, “I guess I just wanna know if it’s for real.”

“Tell him you have a purity ring and are planning on staying a virgin until you’re married. If he still texts you after that, it might be. Or he just thinks you need some convincing.”

“Not everyone is like you, you know,” she muttered.

“Baby,” he chuckled, “most of them are. At least at that age.”

Eliza just glared at him, but didn’t say anything. They continued watching the film, but all the time Mitch was just waiting for her to keep going.

“So you were never in love?” she eventually said.

“Honey, if you have questions about guys falling in love, you’re better off talking to Mac about it. He took girls a lot more seriously than I did, even before he hooked up with Vi.”

She muttered something, but he couldn’t tell what, and he dropped it. Sometimes she needed those small victories.

He wished he could’ve told her differently, that the slightly older guy was probably madly in love with her. And he might be, but he was probably madly in love with anyone who had a cup size the same as Eliza’s. Just thinking about her tits was disturbing as fuck, but that didn’t make it any less true.

“Why doesn’t she want to stay the night?” she suddenly asked.

“She has some exercises, or some shit like that, to do in the morning,” he answered. “She smashed her leg a while back.”

“Is it Anna?”

“Fuck. You know her?”

“No, but Vi talked about her. She’d done some ink on her.”

Anna had a dancing ballerina on her upper thigh, a really nice tattoo, and he’d known Vi’d done it, but when Anna was naked he didn’t pay much attention to her tattoo. There were a lot nicer things to look at.

“Okay. Just shut up about it. I don’t think she wants people to know.”

“And what about you?”

He laughed. “Honey, I don’t care if people know or not, but I like seeing her, and I have a hunch I need to shut up about it for her to keep seeing me.”

“You like seeing her?” Eliza said with a knowing smile.

“Don’t go there ‘cause that’s not it, and you don’t want any details on why I want to keep seeing her.”

“Okay.” Eliza leaned over and gave his cheek a kiss. “Love you, you male chauvinist ass.”

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The guests stuck around for almost a week, and towards the end of their stay, Mitch had decided he really liked Pico, and that Eagle was as crazy as Bull. Those two got along really well, and Mitch was glad he’d missed most of their private conversations. He wasn’t sure he wanted to know what sick, twisted methods they’d shared between themselves. The only discussion he had been privy to was regarding how many coils there was supposed to be in a hangman’s knot. Bull had argued that thirteen was the correct number, while Eagle claimed that was superstitious bollocks, anything over eight was fine as long as the person you were hanging wasn’t too big. Mitch had left them alone after that.

“Whatta you think?” Mac asked as he dropped down next to him in the couch.

“About what?”

“Fuck!” Mac shrugged. “Take a pick. Going into business with some Europeans, someone trying to hack us, Wrench as a prospect... All of the above?”

Wrench had been suggested as the next prospect, and Mitch had thought it was a good choice. Wrench was definitely the one he liked best among the current hang-arounds.

“I don’t know, but I think Wrench is good. A bit cold, but not in a creepy Bull kind of way. He’d get the job done.”

“That’s what I think,” Mac agreed. “Was a bit surprised that Dawg said he’d sponsor him. I thought Sisco would.”

Mitch had thought the same thing. Wrench and Sisco had gotten pretty close the last few months, but apparently Dawg had kept an eye on him as well, and Dawg had a good eye when it came to judging people. He’d apparently seen something in Wrench that he liked. They hadn’t voted yet, though; there were some things Brick and Bear wanted to do first, and when Mitch saw his dad walking over to Wrench with a bottle of tequila, he assumed it was the ‘get the fucker drunk as fuck and make him talk’ test coming up.

“Think he’ll do fine,” Mitch said and looked around and found Mech staring at one of the strippers, which was unusual, but it also reminded him of something he’d been meaning to mention to him. “I just thought about something. I need to talk to Mech. I’ll call you tomorrow.”

“Yeah. Need a night by the river soon,” Mac grumbled. When Mitch looked at him with a raised eyebrow, Mac sighed. “It’s Vi. The fucking hormones make her cry all the damn time. She cried about a puppy who stumbled outside a shop yesterday. I just need to spend a night with someone who isn’t bawling.”

“Next week,” Mitch agreed and walked over to Mech and sat down next to him instead. “What would Lynn say about you ogling tits?”

“She knows I’m a man, and all men are slaves to boobs. The unconquerable desire to eye the amorous sources of the unmerciful attraction every man feels.”

Mitch looked at the girl who was definitely showing off her impressively-sized tits to Mech. “Yup, doomed to forever hankering the swelled fleshy spires dangled in front of us,” he chuckled, which made Mech laugh and continue.

“Chained down by the hypnotizing black arts coming from the female cones.”

“Cursed to forever dream of the swelling sweetness adorning the female bosoms.”

“What *the fuck* are you two talking about?” Bull almost roared.

“Boobs,” Mitch and Mech answered in unison.

“Fucking hell, you two aren’t right in the head.”

Mitch just laughed and turned towards Mech. “What does the security look like now? Think the alarms and firewalls we have are enough? Just thought we could do a setup at our houses, so we don’t have to come here every time that ass makes a feeble attempt.”

Mech sat still and continued to stare at the swelling sweetness in front of him while he was thinking. Mitch had learned early on that it was best to just let Mech process things at his own speed. It might look as if he was slow, but he was just going through every possible scenario, and his imagination for scenarios was impressive. His brain worked like a fucking computer, and Mitch’d learned to trust whatever Mech concluded. He was rarely wrong.

As many hackers and hacktivists, Mitch’s interest had started on 4chan, a place mostly for posting pictures. It was basically pictures and comments sorted into separate forums based on what topic it could be considered. There were a lot of things he liked about it, but especially that it was anonymous.

Among all those boards was one called the ‘/b/ board,’ the ‘anything goes’ board, and its main purpose was to post stuff in the category ‘no eye or brain bleach in the world can make

you forget this.’ Most of the pictures posted there were posted to make sure people never came back. Mitch’d fucking loved it!

The main reason he’d liked 4chan, and especially the /b/ board, was that it was the opposite of what Facebook later turned into. It was honest, crude, and brutal. No one ever tried to show themselves off as the perfect person with the perfect family who always did cute and funny things with their kids. Also, nothing was ever archived on 4chan. A thread could explode and go on forever, or it died and disappeared. That was where memes evolved and came from, like lolcats—all of it started in the petri dish that was 4chan.

It was also where Anonymous came from, but before it turned into hacktivism it was all about creating Lulz—laughs.

Mitch’s all time favorite prank was when they fucked with an online thing for kids, like an early version of Second Life. They all signed up for it, using the exact same avatar—a black guy with an afro and a suit—and took over the place. Like swarming an area to stop people from getting through, or to form swastikas with their avatars. The best joke was when they blocked the entrance to an online pool with all their avatars who looked exactly the same. The expression ‘Pool’s closed’ had turned into a label for a successfully executed hack or prank after that.

Then it turned into hacktivism and fucking with the man. ‘The Man’ being anyone who wanted to limit the online information flow in any way. Around the time Anonymous went after a neo-Nazi blogger and radio show host, Mech was on to Mitch, and warned Brick about his hacking activities. That’s when Brick handed him over to Mech to make sure he was taught properly. He’d really thought he knew a lot about hacking before that, but he’d been dead wrong.

Mech’s online handle, Blue Knight, was one that Mitch’d heard of long before he knew it was him. He was a legend, no longer officially active as a hacker, but he was still talked about. Mainly since he’d managed to hack into pretty much every .mil server in the US, and the .mil servers, the ones belonging to the US military, had a special status among

hackers. When it came out that Blue Knight had hacked the hq.af.mil server, his status as a member of the absolute elite had been solidified. It was the server belonging to the US Air Force's headquarters, which was one of the units in charge of the cyber warfare. He hadn't done it to steal information or destroy anything, real hackers rarely did, but just to see if it could be done. Unofficially, Mech and him were still doing some stuff for fun. Mainly helping out, since they were both still convinced that anyone trying to limit the web deserved to be fucked with.

The thing Mitch liked most about Mech was that he never showed off, never even tried, and he was good at making other people understand. For example, Mech had described the hacking attempt on them to the other members as trying to anally fuck someone with a flaccid dick and without lube, which had made everyone understand just how stupid it was.

"I think it could be done," Mech mumbled. "I'm just trying to figure out how we can do it without opening another port for him to mess with."

"What if we turn that into the honeypot?" Mitch asked.

Mech smiled. "Yeah. That's a good idea. Think Lynn would appreciate me spending more time at home."

"Even if it's in front of the computer?" Mitch asked with a laugh.

"That's where I am most of the time anyway, and she doesn't give a fuck what I do while I'm at it. Let's have a look at it tomorrow," Mech said and stood up. "I'm gonna go home and see if I can catch Stella's boyfriend."

Mech had two kids, Dennis, who was the same age as Violet, and Stella who'd turned eighteen earlier that year. And now she had a boyfriend. She'd tried to argue that he should be allowed to stay the night at Mech's house since she was of age, and Mech had said he was perfectly welcome but shouldn't expect to leave in the morning with his dick intact. The boyfriend had still had the guts to sneak in a few nights, and now Mech was staying awake at night to see if he could catch him.

“Sure. I’m going home, too.”

Mech just gave him a curious eye, but didn’t ask any questions.

Once he was outside, and Mech had left, he picked up the phone and called Anna. He was hoping he’d be able to get her to stay the night.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

You're a Hogger

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We'd seen each once or twice a week since that first time. I sent him a text if Irina was away, and if he could he came by. He'd called a couple of times as well, and those times I took a cab to his place, and then another one back home a few hours later. This time I'd gone to his place.

I had fallen asleep, and when I woke up, I was alone in the bed. I got up and collected my clothes and took my cane from the glass railing. When I took it, I could see right outside to the terrace and that was where he was, lying on the couch, smoking. It was warm for being November, but not *that* warm. I went downstairs and outside.

"Hey, babe," he smiled when he saw me. "Was kinda hoping you wouldn't wake up."

"You know I can't stay," I said and sat down in one of the armchairs.

He hadn't nagged but had still made it very clear that he'd like me to stay. I honestly wasn't sure why I kept refusing, but I still felt uncomfortable with it.

"Come here." He reached for me and pulled me down on top of him. "What exactly do you do?"

"I massage and stretch. Then there are some other things to strengthen the muscles to compensate for paralyzed areas."

"There are areas that are paralyzed?"

"It's... hard to explain, but yes. But it's also to stop my leg from withering away."

He hugged me tighter. "What if I help with the massage and the stretching, and I'll throw in some morning sex for exercise as well? I'll even make a huge breakfast for you. I know you like those."

That was pretty appealing, and he usually stayed the night when we were at my place, but he left not long after we woke up. Probably because I basically pushed him out the door, but it would be nice to try to get used to him seeing it. He'd been really okay with the leg so far, and never seemed grossed out by what it looked like.

“Planning on staying out here?” I asked in an attempt to gain some time before I had to answer, and I looked at him. “Because that’s not going to happen.”

“Nah,” he answered with a laugh. He pointed up. “Like lying here and watching that while smoking some pot.”

I looked up, and it was a beautiful, starlit night.

“I never smoked pot,” I mumbled.

“Really?”

“I smoked regular smokes, but I quit a few years ago. I stayed away from drugs, though. Didn’t drink much either.”

“Wanna try?” he said and held the joint in front of me.

“No.” I knew most of these guys smoked pot like others smoked cigarettes, I just didn’t want to. I was prepared for him to ask me why not, but he didn’t. Just shrugged and put it to his own lips. “Okay. I’ll stay. I need to text Irina, so she knows I’m okay, and then I’ll come up to bed.”

“Let’s go now, I bet you left your phone on the nightstand.” He sat up and grabbed my cane, and he was right. I’d forgotten the phone just as I always did. He usually had to run up and get it for me before I left. “Get up on my back.”

“Why?”

“Wanna try something.”

I stood and jumped up on his back. He reached behind and took a firm grip of my ass and hauled me higher up.

“Starting to see how those guys can toss around ballerinas all the time. You don’t weigh anything.”

“And I weigh more now than I ever have.”

“You look fine.”

“I know,” I said and laughed. “But thank you. I have boobs and curves now. When I danced I didn’t have any body fat at all. It’s not very flattering, so I’m quite fond of this.”

He carried me up the stairs and helped me off with my clothes. I texted Irina while he got undressed before following me into the bed. I turned around and pulled the cover around me.

“I only have one cover, so you’re gonna have to play nice,” Mitch muttered and pulled some of the cover off me. “You never told me about breakfast.”

“What about breakfast? What I want for breakfast?”

“No, you said you used to only eat a grapefruit.”

That’s when I understood what he meant. I’d mentioned that after the first night when he commenting about me really liking my breakfast.

“Actually, I was more eager to get you away since I was in a lot of pain.”

“Aha, sneaky girl.”

“But I do like breakfast now. I couldn’t eat much before dancing. I had a light breakfast, light lunch, and then ate late at night, after performance if I had one.”

He turned me around. “How many hours were you working each day?”

“Class and training started at 10:30, twelve to six were rehearsals, and a few hours of performance at night.”

As soon as the words were out of my mouth, all those things came back to me, and clearly recalled the feeling of walking through the corridors with the coffee in my hand and bag over my shoulder. Or sitting on the floor, warming up my feet while laughing and talking to the other dancers. Then warming up the rest of my body, stretching, and finally at night doing the makeup for the performance. I turned around again and tried to take deep breaths.

“I’m tired,” I mumbled. “Good night.”

“Night.”

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I woke up the next morning by Mitch kissing my shoulder and neck.

“So how do you start?”

“Massage me,” I mumbled when the cramp took hold of my leg as soon as I tried to sit up. I grabbed the leg and started with the back of my thigh. “You can do the lower leg.”

I didn’t mind at all that he was helping me at the moment. It seemed like a much bigger thing when I wasn’t actually mid morning cramps, but for now I was glad for any help I could get.

He started, but it wasn’t doing much, so I looked at him.

“Harder. *Much* harder.”

“Okay,” he chuckled.

We continued in silence, but when I lay back, he stopped and looked at me. I held up the leg and started on the back of my thigh while slowly pushing it against my body.

“Massage and push,” I said, and he did as I’d asked without questioning.

“Jesus, how far can you get your leg?” he asked when the leg was getting closer to my shoulder.

“It’s going all the way. Keep massaging.”

The cramps started to subside a few minutes later, and I indicated for him to let go and sat up, starting to stretch that way instead. When I started to relax, I finally looked at him again.

“You weren’t lying,” he smiled when he noticed my eyes on him. “You are a hogger.”

“Sorry, but I did warn you.”

“You did. Still think you need to do something to make it up to me when you’re done.”

I thought about it, and decided I could do some more workout when I got home, and that I could be done for now. So I laughed and pushed him over to his back. Straddling his legs, I looked down at him. I drew my hands over his tattoos and through the hair on his chest before leaning down and giving him a kiss.

“I think you’re cheating with the exercise,” he whispered against my lips. “Not sure if I should scold you for it to make sure you don’t use that as an excuse to not stay here, or just roll with it.”

“I can do the rest while you make me that big breakfast.”

“Okay, but I’m going to make sure you do.”

He smiled when I rose up and moved further down to lick his nipples. By the time I reached his dick, he was hard, and I grabbed the root of it and took as much in my mouth as I could.

“Fuck, Anna,” he groaned and put his hand on the back of my head.

I kept it up, and I liked it. I liked feeling him throbbing inside my mouth, his hand flexing around my neck, and the moans when I squeezed my hand harder or ran my tongue around his glans.

“Babe!” he said and his grip around my neck got harder as he tried to pull me off. “If you want some, you need to stop.”

I sat up and reached for the condoms he kept in the nightstand. “I want some.”

“Of course you do.” He flipped us around and took the condom from my hand. “Like that about you, you always want some.”

He was right; I was a pretty easy lay, and I knew it. I didn’t care much, though. We were very much in agreement about this, and it was good, not complicated at all, and he was fun. We had a lot of fun. He’d also gone out of his way to keep me comfortable at all times. It never felt weird, and I assumed what Lisa had said about him getting a lot of practice wasn’t

just about technique, but also how to handle booty calls in a smooth way.

When I felt him teasing my opening with the tip of his dick, I smiled and he chuckled.

“Always want some.”

“Yes,” I agreed. “And you make it so easy to get some.”

He pushed inside, lay down on top of me, and kissed me. His hand rested on my cheek, and I opened my eyes and met his.

“When it’s this good, I don’t fight it.” His other hand went down to the back of my knee, and he pushed the leg up to the front of his upper arm, and his hand was on my behind. “God damn, gotta love that morning stretching if this is what it does.”

I grabbed his cheeks and kissed him to make him stop talking. Talking seemed to work him up, and I didn’t want him to be done too soon. I felt him smiling, and his other hand went down to rest next to his other on my ass, squeezing hard.

He’d been touching my bad leg more and more, stroking the scars, and I was starting to be pretty okay with it, which was probably why I’d been fine with him helping me with the massage. It hadn’t felt strange or like something I should be uncomfortable with.

I wrapped my free leg around his waist and continued kissing him, my arms around his neck, and kept it up until I felt myself getting closer.

“Don’t stop,” I moaned into his ear.

“Fuck! Give me a sec,” he groaned after a while, let go of my leg, and moved us around so I was on top. “Like watching you.”

I knew he wouldn’t be able to take it easy for long in this position, he never did, and as suspected he soon sat up, arms around me, and managed to fuck me from underneath. I came, hugging him hard and with my face pressed against his neck.

“Babe, fuck! So good!” His hand went up to my hair and he fisted it, holding me tightly against him. “Shit!”

He hugged me, and then I felt him coming as well. Afterwards, we both sat still, just holding each other.

“Did I make it up to you?” I finally mumbled.

“Oh, yes,” he chuckled and leaned back to look at me. “You can hog my cover whenever you want, baby. Want some breakfast?”

“Sure,” I said and rose to get off him. “No grapefruit.”

I followed him downstairs, and I sat on the countertop, doing my leg exercises while he made me breakfast. It actually worked pretty well, and him blabbing during it all made it more fun. I might not have been as focused as I usually was, but on the other hand I’d been doing them for a long time, so it didn’t require much brain activity to do them anymore.

“What do you know about Russian Oligarchs?” he asked out of nowhere.

“Probably not much more than the average American,” I said and continued to lift my leg in a straight line. That particular movement tended to tease the sciatic nerve, which meant it hurt a little, so I closed my eyes, but kept talking. “Mom probably knows more.”

When he dropped the bacon in the frying pan, my stomach grumbled, and he laughed.

“So no inside information about Russia, then?”

“I know a lot about it during the revolution, or... both of them, actually. Some about the time after both of them, too. My dad’s family left Russia in 1922 when the Bolsheviks went after religion, and Mom once the Iron Wall fell. There was a lot going on around that time, of course, but she doesn’t talk about it much. If she talks it’s about the ballet, but I’m guessing that’s not your major interest.”

“No,” he answered with a smile and gave me a kiss. “How do you like your bacon?”

“*Very* crispy, and then lying on paper for a while. That makes them even more crispy.”

“The girl has good bacon taste.” He let go of me and moved back to the stove. “What would you say that the average American knows about Russian Oligarchs, then?”

To some, the Russians seemed very exotic, but besides asking me to say something in Russian when we met outside the sex shop, he’d never mentioned it. Either way, I couldn’t be called more than a half Russian, and although I’d been there a few times, I would never be considered a native to the people there. We’d kept up with some of the traditions and the language, but that was about it. It was actually not Mom who’d been the firmest about it, either; it was Irina and Dad who tried to maintain that part of our heritage. I assumed it had to do with Mom never having seen the culture and traditions in the same romantic light as Dad and Irina. She’d always spoken Russian with me when I was a child, though, but these days it was mostly English.

I sighed and tried to remember what he’d asked me. What the average American knew about oligarchs, and then remembered what Mom used to call them the few times she’d mentioned them.

“Vory v kostymukah.”

“Isn’t that like the mob?”

“No. That’s Vory v zakone. Vory v kostymukah means thieves in suits.” I got off the counter and sat down on the floor to do some more stretching. “Some say the word oligarch has lost its meaning because they’re not as prominent, and that the government has taken the power back, but I doubt that’s true. I think they’re just in the government these days.”

He studied me with interest with the spatula in his hand. “What did your mom said about the time after the revolution?”

“Not much. She doesn’t talk much about her life either before or after the end of the Soviet Union. I don’t think they’re pleasant memories.”

I'd heard some from other sources, but I'd never asked her about it. Like rumors and accusations about how ballet dancers were used as 'currency' with foreigners who visited the Soviet Union. Basically used as prostitutes, either to encourage the guests, or to later be blackmailed with proof of their indiscretions. I wasn't even sure if I wanted to know if it was true, and given how little she'd ever mentioned about her early life in general, I doubted that was one of the things she'd tell me about, and it wasn't something I'd share with Mitch anyway. "I know that many of the oligarchs laid the foundation to their fortunes on the black market right after the revolution."

"I know." His back was towards me now, and he was cracking eggs into the frying pan. "And then they used the money to buy the public companies."

"Why are you asking when you seem to know more than I do?"

He turned around and smiled. "Just curious if there was something about it that I didn't know."

"I doubt it. When is the breakfast done?"

"Five minutes. Want some fruit, too?"

I nodded, dearly hoping that we were done with the Russia questions, and I seemed to be in luck.

The breakfast was great—eggs, bacon, fruit, and coffee—all eaten while he was *not* asking questions, which was really nice. When the food was gone, he followed me to the door and held my face in his big hands.

"I'm leaving for a ride tomorrow, and we won't be back until Thanksgiving, so have a great Thanksgiving.

"I'll do my best. And you, too."

"I'll call you," he gave me another kiss before opening the door for me.

"Do that and thanks for breakfast."

"You're welcome," he said, and I turned to walk away. "And girl, next time you're here you're staying the night. I

liked the massage.”

“Okay.”

Morning sex was definitely a good thing, so I could agree with that. I figured I had to tell Irina about him, though. I just hoped she didn’t want to be formally introduced to him. Introducing a fuck buddy didn’t seem like the natural thing to do.

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Lisa had accused me of disappearing from the face of the planet, and she called me two days later saying that she bloody knew Mitch was away, and that I should take my responsibility as her BFF and let her get drunk in my company. She’d decided we were having a full night out—barhopping. I wasn’t convinced it was such a good idea, but she wouldn’t take no for an answer.

I was nervous; I hadn’t actually been out barhopping since before the accident, and I wasn’t sure how I’d be able to walk around when I was drunk. At the same time, it truly felt as if I needed it. I needed to—as Irina used to say—let my hair down.

“Really?” Lisa said when I opened the door. “That’s your barhopping outfit?”

I wasn’t looking at her, though. I was looking at the tall guy with black hair standing a few feet behind her. I remembered him being called Wrench. He’d been at the sex shop when we were there, and that thought alone made me blush.

“Why is he here?”

“I think Dad is prepping him for Prospecting,” she whispered. “He’s a hang-around, and it’s his job to make sure we get home safe and sound tonight.”

“So he’s gonna... follow us around?”

“Yup.” She turned around and slapped his arm. “Right?”

“Yeah,” he mumbled. He didn’t seem overjoyed about his ‘work’ that day. “I’ll stay in the background.”

“How very secret service of you,” I mumbled and went inside to get my stuff.

I knew Lisa’s comment about my outfit meant she’d roam my closet for half an hour before telling me what to wear instead. I honestly didn’t mind, I’d prepared by just putting anything on instead of bothering before she’d had her say. That’s the way she worked, and so far I’d always looked a lot better in whatever she suggested than anything I’d picked myself. Spending one’s days in either training gear or dresses covered in rhinestones made it hard to really know what normal people wore when they went out to dance. Back in New York, I’d tended to go for jeans and a nice top, but I doubted that would be hot enough for Lisa.

By the time we’d reached the first bar, I was dressed in a black skirt with a red shirt, and Wrench was standing in the corner sipping on something I suspected was a virgin Cuba libre. I turned to Lisa.

“Does that happen often?” I asked and nodded towards Wrench.

“Kind of does, actually. Dad still thinks I’m the same as when I was sixteen. You know, like when we went to that party at the abandoned house with Rick.”

“Okay, can we just get that part straight, *we* didn’t go there with Rick. *You* did and made me come with you, and then you just disappeared.”

“I didn’t *disappear*! Dad and Brick barged in and pulled me out of there. Either way, sneaking out became a lot harder after that, and these days he sends someone with me if he knows I’m going out.”

“You’re kidding me?”

“He pulls the ‘for your own safety’ stunt, but they’re usually just standing around and leave me alone. Just makes it slightly awkward to try to pick someone up.” She smiled and toasted towards Wrench, and he looked even more pissed.

“He’s got really nice eyes, doesn’t he?”

He did. Ice blue in the shade my old roommate used to call panty-dropping blue, and they looked especially stunning in contrast with his black hair and beard, but he mostly seemed annoyed when I smiled at him, so I turned back towards Lisa and left him alone.

“When did you cut off your hair?” I asked, mainly to have something to talk about. She’d cut her hair once when we were younger, but I’d only heard about it. It was when I’d already moved to New York, and we mostly emailed each other. “You look nice, don’t get me wrong, it’s just a bit unusual.”

“I got dumped. Sort of.”

“How do you sort of get dumped?”

“I met this guy by coincidence at the hospital. Really hot. He came back the next day with flowers and asked me out. In general, he totally wined and dined me. Super cute, and a famous NHL player, so he took me everywhere in L.A. And the sex... Oh my god, the sex was amazing. I fell head over heels.”

“Sounds great.”

“It was. Until I realized I was the only one in the state who didn’t know he was married. I saw him in a newscast with his wife by his side, talking about how she was so supportive and his career would’ve been nothing if it wasn’t for her.”

“Ouch.”

She nodded and shrugged. Lisa was a very tolerant person, but she couldn’t stand people lying to her or deceiving her. Ever! I also knew that she didn’t wallow in misery, so cutting the hair was probably her way of getting some closure on what had happened. It still felt as if it for once should be me offering my support, so I took her hand.

“I’m here if you want to talk or just rant about what an ass he is.”

“Thank you,” she smiled. “I think I’m just done with men for now. I’ve never been very lucky in relationships.”

“Sorry, but how does that explain the hair?”

“I just... He liked my hair, so I cut it off.” She noticed me staring. “I know, not very logical at all, but it made perfect sense in my head right then. Besides, I did it the last time I got dumped, too.”

I really tried to not laugh, and luckily she was too focused on staring into nothing to notice my pretty feeble attempts.

“Actually,” she continued. “I think I did it for the same reason that time, too.”

I couldn't help it, I started laughing, and Lisa being Lisa, she soon laughed just as hard as I did.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

Wanna See My Room?

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It was Thanksgiving, and as usual Mitch was planning on spending the afternoon with the rest of the club at his Dad's place, but he popped by at his Mom's place in the morning. He found her in the kitchen wearing a flowery apron and with sweat dripping from her forehead. Her usually immaculate hairdo was a mess.

"Hi, Honey!" she smiled when she saw him. "Give your sweat-soaked mom a kiss."

"Appealing," he mumbled, but did as she'd asked. "Mac says hi. He was on his way, but then Vi broke down and cried about her stockings tearing, or something like that."

Donna just laughed and waved her hand to indicate it didn't matter. "I'll stop by tomorrow and leave them some leftovers."

"If there are any!" Steve yelled from the living room. Steve, his mom's husband, was a very typical 'Steve,' but Mitch liked him, and he made Donna very happy.

"Are his kids coming by?" Mitch asked with a nod towards the living room.

"Yes. Full house." She pulled out her smokes from the front pocket of the apron and sat down on the chair in front of the stove. After turning on the kitchen fan, she lit it. "Have one with me and tell me how things are. Still canoodling with that ballet dancer?"

In a weak moment, he'd mentioned Anna, and he'd regretted it many times since then. He liked talking to his mom about stuff, but he usually tried to avoid the subject of his fuck buddies, since his mom always assumed they were his

girlfriends. The thing about Anna had slipped out when Donna had said that Jenny, Steve's granddaughter, had started ballet.

"Mom! It's the twenty-first century, no one says that anymore."

"I'm not a twenty-first century woman, and I say whatever the hell I want. And you're avoiding the question."

"I think so. I haven't seen her since before I was away, but I guess I am."

"I don't know how you and your brother could've come from the same womb and grown up in the same household," she muttered. "And the fact that you were my boy, and Mac was Brick's, makes me even more confused, because he was the whore in our marriage."

Mitch laughed. "True. He's not anymore, though."

"No," she said and put out her cigarette with slightly more force than necessary, then she stood up. "Guess he's not."

"Hey," he said, and he felt bad. He shouldn't have said that. "I'm sorry."

"No, don't worry about it."

He assumed it was still a sore spot, the fact that his dad had cheated on her, and, as far as Mitch knew, he'd never cheated on Mel.

"Maybe he grew up," he tried.

"Yeah," she smiled. "When are you gonna grow up?"

"No hurry. And Mac and Vi are gonna give you loads of grandkids. Those two are gonna keep at it for as long as possible, and given how early they started, they'll fill that big house of theirs."

"Thank you." She leaned down and gave him a kiss. "You should bring that ballerina by, though. I'd like to meet her."

"Yeah, 'cause that's not gonna scare her off."

"You little shit. Move, I need to check the turkey and you're in the way."

“I gotta go. If you feel inclined, I’d like some of those leftovers, too.”

“Only for kids who give me grandkids. Work on it until next year.”

“No offence, but if I have a kid by next Thanksgiving, I’ll put a bullet in my head.” He gave her a kiss. “Love you, Ma.”

“Love you. Give my love to everyone. And happy Thanksgiving.”

He exchanged a few words with Steve before he left, and promised him he’d come by soon again.

When he came to his dad’s house, most of the club and their families were there. Everyone seemed to have a nice time, except Vi, who had stopped crying about her stockings, but since she was two days past her due date, she was still in a pretty shitty mood. She was *very* fed up with being pregnant, and Lisa’s comment about it not being unusual for first timers to go as much two weeks past their due date hadn’t helped. It also had made Mac giggle nervously, since he was also very fed up with Vi being pregnant. Mitch wasn’t exactly fed up with it; he just really wanted to meet his godson.

After a dinner that made Mitch feel like he was about to burst, he went downstairs with Lisa, Eliza, Mac, and Vi. He picked up his phone and started surfing, and pretty soon he heard Mac snoring at the other end of the couch.

“What the fuck are you watching!” Brick almost roared when he and Sisco walked into the room. Even Mac woke up from his food coma and sat up to see what was going on. “Change the channel. Now!”

“No!” Lisa yelled and Mitch looked up to see what the fucking problem was. “I wanna see, it’s Anna!”

Mitch leaned closer to the TV. And there she was, in a short top and long skirt, and he could clearly see what she’d meant when she’d said she used to be a lot skinnier. She was nothing but skin and bones. Her ribs were clearly visible, and not only on the sides, but on her chest, too, and her boobs were definitely smaller as well—if you could call them boobs.

That's when he started to notice other things, like how she moved.

"Who the fuck is Anna?" Brick asked.

"My friend," Lisa answered without taking her eyes off the screen. "Look at her, she was so good. Amazing!"

"Is that Anna?" Eliza asked Lisa, but she was smiling at Mitch. "She's pretty."

"She is," Lisa nodded.

Mitch turned his attention back to the TV, and Lisa was right—Anna was amazing. He had no idea what the dance was about. Some guy seemed to be trying to...

"She's a fucking cock tease," his dad laughed. "Look at that."

"What the fuck are you watching?" This time it was Bear. "Is that Anna?"

"Yeah," Lisa answered.

"So beautiful," Vi sniveled. "It's so sad."

"Why?" Brick asked.

"She can't dance anymore. And look at how good she was. She was really going places, a real talent."

"This is La Bayadère," Eliza suddenly said. "It's really sad. And sexist."

"How do you know that?" He had to ask. As far as he knew his little sister didn't give a shit about ballet.

"I wrote an essay about how women were portrayed in some classical ballets. You know, to piss off the aspiring prima ballerinas in my class." Of course she did. His sister, the feminist tease.

"She's from here," Lisa explained to Brick, who'd sat down and was actually watching. "She was in an accident about two years ago. Hurt her leg, so she can't dance anymore."

They all sat in silence and watched. Around the time when Edie and Dawg showed up, Anna was dancing in a red outfit instead, and she looked kind of like a harem girl. She was dancing her fucking heart out and moving in graceful leaps and pirouettes all over the stage, holding a bunch of flowers and then...

“What the fuck happened?” he asked

“She was dancing to the man she loved and the woman he’s gonna marry. The fiancée and her dad knows he’s really in love with Anna and put a snake into the basket of flowers. Now the creepy guy who’s also in love with Anna says he can save her if she marries him, but she’d rather die than live without the love of her life.” Eliza sat quiet for a while. “Imagine, she must’ve practiced every day since she was a kid. Dancing all the time, spent her entire life on it and now—just like that—she can’t do it anymore.”

Having never seen Anna dance before, he was stunned. She was amazing, and he hadn’t fully realized until then how shit it was that she couldn’t anymore. Even if he thought it looked kind of silly, he could see why people thought it was beautiful. When he looked around the room, he realized that they were all staring at the screen, completely lost... in a ballet. Half a biker club was watching a ballet on TV. That was pretty bizarre.

“Fuck, she’s flexible,” Sisco mumbled. “That has to be so awesome.”

He could’ve told Sisco that it was awesome—more than awesome. Sex with Anna was just getting better, too. And she was fun, cute, and so... loveable. He wanted to call her all the fucking time but tried to keep it down. He was pleased as hell about managing to get her to stay the night at his place; he didn’t like her just taking off in the middle of the night. Since she hogged the cover, he got to sleep really close to her, and he’d enjoyed helping her with the massages in the morning.

The dude she was dancing with lifted her up, and Mitch almost laughed at how graceful it looked. She must’ve felt like a sack of potatoes when he carried her on his back.

“Those shoes doesn’t look very comfortable,” Mel said, and he hadn’t even noticed her coming down the stairs.

“They’re not,” Lisa answered. “She let me try them once. They were horrible, and they don’t last long, either. Remember her telling me the professional dancers sometimes used two pairs per show. That the shoes ‘died.’”

“Died?” Eliza asked. “How?”

“I don’t know. I never really got it, but that’s what she said.”

“Wonder what her feet look like,” Edie said. She too kept her eyes on the TV. “Have to be a damn mess.”

In fact, they looked pretty bad, and Anna still claimed they looked great now compared to what they used to do.

On the screen, she was on her toes and held her leg straight up along her side. He’d once pushed her legs straight out to the sides, stretched in a split, and she didn’t bat an eye. With his hands on the inside of her thighs, he’d fucked her with determination, just blown out of his mind that it was even possible. He’d also had her leaning face down over a table, with her leg resting on his shoulder, bent in a way that shouldn’t even be possible, and she’d come, hard! Which of course meant he did, too.

“Do you think she’s watching?” Vi asked.

“No,” Lisa shook he head. “Not a chance in hell that she is. She doesn’t even wanna talk about dancing. I’ve tried but it’s still too sore.”

Suddenly, Anna turning over and saying she was tired when he asked about dancing was explained. Fuck, it must really have hurt her. He felt like an ass.

“She must miss it,” he said.

“Probably, but she’s still avoiding it. She just can’t and she should.”

He heard sniveling and realized that Vi was crying again.

“Honey,” Mac chuckled. “Come here.”

“It’s just so sad,” Vi cried and moved closer to Mac.
“Look! She’s so beautiful on stage, and you can see how much she loves it.”

On the screen, Anna held her arms around the fag dude’s neck, and that’s when it hit Mitch like a gut punch: he didn’t like it! In fact, that had been in the back of his mind since the very beginning of this; every time she looked at a dude like that, almost kissing them, he didn’t like it. Which was disturbing as fuck because getting possessive of Anna had not been the plan at all.

“What the fuck happened now?” Bear asked a while later, while Mitch was still in a panic about his feelings for Anna.

“When he was married to the other woman, the gods punished them by tearing down the temple, and everyone died,” Eliza said, and then moved closer to Mitch, taking his hand. She used to do that as a kid when she was upset about something she saw on TV. He put his arm around her and pulled her closer, thankful for the interruption. “Now she greets him in heaven and they dance. I don’t like this part at all.”

“Why?” he asked and looked at her. “Is this some feminist crap?” he added to tease her.

“Yes,” she said and hit his arm. “He totally abandoned her and married that other woman, probably knowing she’s the one who’d killed her, so why would she forgive him?”

“Forgiving is divine,” Mac said and pushed their little sister with his foot. “Isn’t it, baby?” He looked down at Vi who was resting against his chest. “Are you still crying?”

“Yes,” she said and blew her nose. “Imagine if you’d been practicing riding since you were, like, eight—”

“Six,” Lisa interrupted her. “She was six, probably younger. I’m guessing her parents had her practicing even before that.”

“Six, then. All the time and all the things she gave up, and then you couldn’t ever do it again.”

“That’s fucking rough,” Sisco mumbled. “But, damn it, she’s hot.”

“I’m not saying it’s not sad,” Mac said after a glare at Sisco and then one at Mitch before turning his attention back to Vi. “Just saying you’ll get dehydrated if you keep crying like that.”

And now Sisco’s comment was getting to Mitch as well. This wasn’t good. After a glare at Sisco, he looked at Lisa, who was giving him a knowing smile. Mac knew he was seeing Anna, simply since Mac knew everything about him. If Mac knew, Vi knew, and then there was Lisa and Eliza. Besides the slip to his mom, which didn’t really matter, that was it. There hadn’t really been anything to tell anyone. She wasn’t the first fuck buddy he’d had, and he’d never bothered to tell anyone about them. Like he’d once said to Mac, regarding another one of his fuck buddies, ‘I don’t bring my spunk rag to family dinner.’ Which was a bit harsh, maybe, but nonetheless true. There wasn’t much point in introducing a girl he had no intention of starting a relationship with.

Once the show was over, Edie started laughing. “I just have to point out that I’ve spent Thanksgiving with the better part of a biker club, and we watched ballet. No one would ever believe me.”

“I’d have to kill you if you told anyone,” Dawg said and gave her a kiss.

“You’d never kill me, you luuurve me.”

“That is true,” he laughed, “but a man’s gotta protect his rep.”

Mitch was surrounded by couples and needed to get out; he gave Eliza a kiss and went upstairs and out on the porch. He lit a joint and sat down and leaned back to stare up in the sky.

“You okay, son?” his dad asked as he sat down next to him. “Guess this isn’t the kind of Thanksgiving you’d like.”

“It’s fine, Dad.” He turned and smiled at him. The door opened and Mac came outside.

“If you sneak off, you take me with you.”

“Sorry,” Mitch said and handed his brother a joint. “How’s the girl?”

“Fine. Fed up, and I’m fed up with her being fed up.” Mac lay down on another recliner and lit up. “This is what I needed. You okay?” The last question was directed at Mitch.

“I’m fine. Why the fuck is everyone asking me that?”

“I was wondering since you just spent two hours very focused on a bunch of people prancing around in ridiculous costumes.”

Mitch gave him the finger, but didn’t get away that easily.

“Yeah, what the fuck was up with that?” Brick laughed. “Cuz you were really paying attention. Got a boner for Lisa’s friend?”

He didn’t answer, only shrugged while avoiding looking at his dad. He definitely had a boner for her, but that wasn’t the confusing part. And he might be an ass who did his best to nail as many women as possible, but he didn’t brag about it, so he kept his mouth shut.

-o0o-

The phone was ringing, and it was the middle of the fucking night. At first he thought it was the alarm they’d set up on the server, and that the motherfucking hacker was at it again. Mitch’d been woken up two or three times a week by him, and it was definitely getting to him. But he soon realized it was actually someone calling him, and it was either bad news or Eliza who couldn’t sleep and wanted to go for a ride.

“What!” he half yelled and tried to open his eyes.

“Brother, I hope you’re ready for your godson, because he’s on his way.”

“I’ll meet you at the hospital.”

“No rush, it’s gonna be a while.”

“I’m on my way.” There was no fucking way in hell he’d miss a second of this.

When he came to the hospital, he met up with Lisa in the waiting area.

“Wow! Is that what you look like without makeup?” he said, and she glared at him.

“What?” she snarled.

“Nothing. Heard anything?”

“No.”

They sat down, and then the waiting started. One by one, other members came as well. Everyone but Sisco, but he was never around for births. Mitch had a vague idea why, but he'd never asked about it. It wasn't his business.

Some left to get food or coffee, but the club members and families were still filling up the visitors room the entire day. Bear couldn't even sit still. He walked back and forth in the hallway when he wasn't walking back and forth outside while smoking.

Around noon, Wolf, a former member who was enjoying his retirement in San Diego, came inside.

“What the fuck?!” Brick yelled with a laugh.

“Didn't think I'd miss my little country girl having her first baby, did you?” Wolf answered and started handing out hugs.

Wolf and Vi'd been the only ones in the club who liked country, and they were close, but Mitch had honestly not even thought about him coming. But there he was. Wolf sat down and joined in on the waiting while talking to the older members.

And then, at 3 p.m., Mitch saw his brother coming towards them, and he had a blue bundle in his arms. He stood up to meet him. Mac walked up to Brick and Bear first, holding up the kid.

“This is Joshua,” he said with the biggest fucking smile Mitch had ever seen on his face. “Joshua Mitchell Baxter.”

They'd fucking named the kid after him, and he felt like a fag when he choked up. Bear was holding Joshua, so Mitch

took the chance and gave his brother a hug.

“Fuck! You’re not naming him after yourself? Or Dad?”

“Nope,” Mac smiled.

“Thank you!”

“No cruising for pussy with my kid, you hear me?”

“No.” When Bear handed him Joshua, he looked at him. Besides the pouty mouth from his mom, he looked a lot like Mac, and he didn’t have a single hair on his head. “Hey there.”

He leaned down to kiss his little bald head, and he smelled... amazing, so sweet.

“He’s perfect,” he mumbled.

“How’s Katze?” Bear asked.

“Fine. You can go and see her soon.”

Mitch couldn’t take his eyes off the kid. He was a bit scrunchy, but so pretty. And it hit him, his brother was a dad. He had a son, and that was so mind blowing he couldn’t even comprehend it. The boy he was holding was Mac’s son! Mac put his arms around Mitch’s shoulders.

“You’re gonna have to have my back on this,” he said.

“Always got your back. You know that.”

“Give him here. Vi’s gonna freak if I don’t come back with him soon.”

“Tell her I love her,” he said and gave Joshua one last kiss. “And tell her that he’s a beauty, and that I’ll see her tomorrow.”

He handed him over and watched his brother walk away with the kid. He knew they’d have a party later that night; they always did to get the new dad piss drunk. Hell, they all got piss drunk to celebrate another club kid being born. Even Sisco was in on those because it was a big thing to everyone, and he decided to go home and get some sleep, so he’d be able to stay up.

“Hey, isn’t that the flexible dancer?” Sisco mumbled and hit Mitch’s arm.

Mitch looked up and saw Anna by the door; she looked around and smiled when she found Lisa. Not even mentioning how relieved she looked.

“Aren’t you occupied with your friend?” Mitch asked and nodded in the general direction of the blonde Jane. She was Sisco’s friend from Seattle and had come to visit for a few days.

“Hang on,” Sisco laughed. “What was that?”

“What?” he asked and tore his eyes from Anna to turn towards Sisco.

“I know that look, you’re tapping that bitch.” He shook his head with a laugh. “Should’ve figured that out when you were all of a sudden all into ballet.”

Mitch had no idea how to respond, so with a, “Whatever,” he got up and went to find Mac, but he heard Sisco laughing behind him. Mitch pushed his way through the bar, untangled himself from a few sweetbutts, and finally found Mac, insanely drunk, leaning against the pool table.

“My brother!” Mac yelled. When he noticed Anna coming towards them, Mac’s smile grew, and he put a firm arm around Mitch’s shoulders and turned towards her. “The ballerina!”

“Congratulations,” Anna smiled with a slight blush. “Lisa called me, I hope it’s okay that I’m here.”

“Of course!” he yelled. Mac always talked really loudly when he was drunk, and now he was making Mitch slightly deaf. “Did you know that you had half a biker club staring at a ballet performance during Thanksgiving? All of us! We were blown away!”

“You watched?” she asked, and gave Mitch a quick look before turning her attention back to Mac.

“Yup. Didn’t get much of it,” Mac said while trying to swallow a burp. He slammed his hand on Mitch’s back.

“Mitch couldn’t tear his eyes off the screen. Wanna see a picture of Joshua?”

“Yes!” Anna seemed as relieved as Mitch about the change of subject. She leaned forward and looked at Mac’s phone. “Joshua, it’s a very nice name.”

“Joshua Mitchell Baxter. It’s a great name.”

Anna gave him a surprised look and smiled. “You gave him your brother’s name?”

“Yeah.” Mac was still smiling like a moron while staring at the picture of his son. “Named after his godfather and the best guy I know.”

“Can I get you a beer or something?” Mitch asked Anna.

“Beer is fine.”

He signaled to a sweetbutt, and she immediately came with a beer. He took it and handed it over to Anna, and when the girl tried to put her arms around his neck, he pushed her to the side to indicate he wasn’t interested. It was still pretty fucking obvious what she’d done, and when he looked at Anna again, she gave Mac another hug and kissed his cheek.

“I’ll come by with your present some other day. Thought it was better to wait with it.”

“Yeah. And thanks!”

Then she turned around and walked away. Mac slapped his arm.

“You gonna let her get away?”

He looked after her and then shook his head. “No, but I’ll give her a few minutes.”

He gave her more than a few minutes. He gave her a few hours, and he kept watching her. She mostly stuck to Lisa but talked to Bear and Brick for a while. She stood next to Edie for a pretty long time, but when she sat down on a couch, he went over to her and sat down next to her.

“All good?” he asked and handed her a beer.

“Yeah,” she nodded. She was spinning her cane in her hand, and it looked as if she was avoiding looking at him. “So you saw me dance?”

“Yes.”

“They all asked me about it and pointed out I’d made bikers watch ballet.”

She still wouldn’t look at him, and he had a feeling he knew what it was about. She didn’t like talking about it, and for some reason she wasn’t comfortable with him having seen her dance. He noticed Mac half sleeping in an armchair and pointed at him.

“Wanna help me get him to bed?”

“Sure,” she said and stood up.

They walked over to Mac, and Mitch pulled him up, throwing Mac’s arm over his shoulder and hoisting him up with the help of an arm around his waist.

“Come on, Mac. I’ll take you to bed.”

“Thanks,” he muttered. “Key’s in my pocket.”

“I know.” He started hauling him towards the dorms. “Nice that it’s the other way around for once,” he muttered.

“What do you mean?” Anna asked.

“It’s usually him carrying me. It’s been a while since I had to help him to bed. Probably before Vi.”

“My wife is awesome,” Mac slurred. “And she gave me a son.”

“I know.” He found the key in his pocket and unlocked the door while propping Mac up against the wall. “She’s great. You’re a very lucky man.”

He dragged Mac inside, pushed him into the bed, and pulled off his shoes.

“You all have rooms like this?” Anna asked.

“Yeah.” He patted Mac’s cheek. “Night, bro.”

Anna was standing by the door, and he put his arm around her waist. “Wanna see my room?”

“Really? That was your best pick-up line?” she laughed.

“It was that or ‘wanna fuck me in my room?’”

“That would’ve worked, too.”

He shook his head with a smile and walked her out of the room to the next door and unlocked it. He had her undressed and in his bed not five minutes later.

-o0o-

Anna was resting on his shoulder, and he turned around to his side to face her. Her eyes were still closed, but he could tell she wasn’t sleeping.

“Why don’t you like that I saw you dancing?” he asked.

“I don’t know.” She didn’t even open her eyes. “I just don’t.”

“I’m sorry I asked you about it last time. I know I hurt you.”

“No.” She shook her head and finally opened her eyes. “You did, but... I don’t know. I should probably talk about it.” She was at least smiling, so she wasn’t pissed. “So ask me.”

“What do you miss most?”

She closed her eyes again, like she was trying to visualize it. “Prepping my shoes.”

“Prepping your shoes? How do you do that?”

“When we get the pointe shoes we have to prepare them. It’s two identical shoes, so I always started by deciding which was right and which was left. I tore out the inner sole, stomped on the box—”

“The box?” He didn’t get it. “Why the fuck would you stomp on the box?”

“To make the edges softer.”

“We’re not talking about the box they came in, are we?”

With a surprised laugh, she opened her eyes again and looked at him.

“No,” she smiled and stroked his cheek. “The box is the hard part at the front of the shoe. The edges are hard, so I stomped on it to shape it and to make the edges softer and follow the foot better. I scratched the soles, bent the shank to shape it after my foot, and then sowed on ribbons and elastics.”

“I’m guessing a ‘shank’ has a completely different meaning in your world than it does in mine.”

“It’s the inside sole of the shoe.” She cocked her eyebrow in surprise. “What is in your world?”

“A prison shank. Homemade knife to shank someone when you’re inside,” he answered and gave her a kiss. “Didn’t you get bored with those shoes? Lisa said you used a lot of shoes. That they died?”

“The shank eventually loses its support, it breaks, that’s when the shoe dies. There are stages of a shoe. Some shoes are just a little too soft, so we still use them for practice, but I always had new shoes for a performance. That’s when I needed really firm shoes with a lot of support. And it didn’t bore me. It was almost a meditational thing I did before each performance. A part of getting ready.”

He’d never heard her talk like this. With such ease and passion at the same time. She really missed dancing, and this time she actually seemed to like talking about it, so he wanted her to keep going.

“So she was right, you had new shoes for each performance?”

“It’s not as if we use one pair until they die. Like I said, there are stages, and for the performance I always preferred the new, hard shoes because they gave the arch of the foot the best support. So sometimes I went through two pairs, but I used those pairs for practice later.” When she put her arm around him, he drew her closer and kissed the top of her head. “Sorry if I’m rambling, but the shoes are such a big thing for

any ballerina, and we never forget our first pair. At the ballet in New York, we all had shoes hand made especially for us by one maker.”

“Maker?”

“It was always the same person who made my shoes. He was my maker.”

“Shit. They must’ve cost a fortune.”

“They did when I was younger, but when I worked I didn’t have to pay for them myself anymore.” She nuzzled closer to him. “And the clothes. I miss dressing up in those beautiful costumes. I miss... standing on stage, soaked in sweat with an aching body, and hearing the applause while feeling that I’d done my best—that I delivered. It was a testament to all my work. It sometimes felt as if the stage was the only place I could truly be myself. A place where I could express all the emotions I have deep inside with the help of dancing and the character I was playing. I miss that outlet.”

“And the other side,” he said and stroked her nose with his. “What don’t you miss? Or what things in your life now do you like?”

“I like breakfast. Not obsessing about food and training or sleeping enough. My feet don’t hurt, and I have no blisters. And I have toenails!”

“You used to lose your toenails?” Everything about ballet seemed to be pretty fucking painful.

“It happened. On my big toes.” She went silent. “I still miss it. It’s a very short career even at the best of times and... I didn’t get even that. I miss it.”

“I’m sorry for bringing it up. Again.” He tilted her head back and gave her a kiss. “What else couldn’t you do?”

“I don’t know to be honest. Irina has tried this with me, but I’ve always lived with dancing, so I’m not sure I know what I’ve missed. I did get a tattoo.”

“I know one thing. Smoking pot,” he said. When he noticed how unsure she looked, he shook his head. “I’ll figure

out other things.”

“No,” she said and turned to her back with a smile. “Do you have any?”

Did he? Pot was definitely something he could provide. He turned over and looked through his stash in the bed frame. He found the bag he wanted, and rolled her a joint.

“Sure about this?”

“Yes.”

“You used to smoke regular smokes?” He had some memory of her saying that.

“Yes.”

“Okay.” He lit it and handed it over. “Inhale like usual but hold it for a while. And if you want chocolate or something sweet, I have that here. Take it easy, though. I don’t think you’ll need the entire one.”

He didn’t give her much, but after a while she turned to him.

“I don’t feel anything. Maybe a little like when you’ve had the first morning cigarette, a little dizzy.”

“Give it a while,” he chuckled

He finished the joint and studied her while they were talking. He told her about the other members, his family, and his mom. Suddenly she sat up with a surprised expression.

“That’s weird.”

“Think it hit now?”

“Yeah. It’s like... I have the shortest short-term memory, and anything before feels like yesterday.”

“Yup, that’s it. Feeling sick?”

“No.” She lay back down with a big smile. “And... There’s no pain.”

“What?”

“My leg. There’s usually a dull pain... but nothing.”

“Well. That’s good, I guess.”

She turned and gave him a very stoned smile. “I’m not gonna start smoking pot all the time just to get rid of the pain. Don’t worry.”

“I’m not worried.”

“So you think you can show me more things I’ve missed out on?”

“Yes,” he said, put out the joint, caressed her face, and kissed her. “Loads of things.”

His mind immediately set off, and he came up with a few things she probably hadn’t done, but was interrupted when she pressed her naked body against his. That was what he’d hoped for when he picked that particular weed. It always turned him on, and it seemed to have had the same effect on her. He was definitely going to remember that.

-o0o-

The next day, she came with him to the hospital to visit Vi and Joshua. Mac was already there, and Anna handed over her gift.

“I bought it yesterday,” she said, and then noticed the confusion in Vi’s face. “Sorry. It’s a Russian thing. You don’t buy presents for babies until they are born, it’s customary to point that out. It was a reflex.”

“Thank you,” Vi smiled and then opened the present. It was a Harley carved out of wood. “It’s beautiful.”

Anna was leaning over the crib, looking at Joshua. “I thought it might be fitting.”

“Would you like to hold him?” Vi asked.

“No!” Anna took a step back. “I’m not used to kids, I might drop him or something. I’ll admire him from a distance.”

Mac picked up the baby, turned around and held out his hand. “Give me the cane.”

“No, really...” she tried.

“Just sit down, you won’t drop him.” He took the cane when she sat down, and he handed Joshua over to her. “Just support his neck and he’ll be fine.”

Mitch watched Anna talking to Joshua in Russian with a smile on her lips.

“You better be saying nice things,” Vi said.

“I’m not,” Anna laughed, still looking at Joshua. “Another Russian superstition. It’s bad luck to compliment the baby, so instead we tell them how ugly they are. I don’t mean it, though. He’s adorable.”

She gave his forehead a gentle kiss, and once again mumbled something before handing him back to Mac.

“Thank you,” she smiled. “I enjoyed that.”

Mitch quickly took Joshua from Mac and sat down in an armchair. He was already crazy about this kid and was looking forward to teaching him all the important things in life. The things your parents didn’t really want you to know. When Joshua fell asleep resting on his chest, he felt strangely proud. He ran his hand over his head.

“Mind if I call your kid cue ball?” he asked and wiggled his eyebrows at Mac.

“I’d say yes, but his mother is already calling him that. Didn’t help when Dad quickly informed her it was my genes making him bald.” When Mitch laughed he continued. “Not sure why you’re laughing, your kids are gonna be born like that, too.”

“I can live with that,” he said and gave Joshua’s bald head a kiss.

“I need to get going,” Anna said and stood up.

“Thank you for the present,” Mac said and gave her a hug. “And for coming by yesterday to celebrate.”

“It was nothing. Thank you for inviting me.”

“Want me to give you a lift?” Mitch asked.

“No, I’ll be fine. Spend some time with your little guy.”

“Cool. See you!”

He watched her leave, and then looked down at Joshua again.

“So what’s really going on there?” Vi asked.

He shrugged. “We’re fucking.”

“And you brought your fuck buddy to see your godson?” Vi asked, and he heard the laughter in her voice. “Don’t think so.”

“She’s a friend of Lisa’s and yours, so she was coming here anyway, so I gave her a lift. That’s all.”

Mac shook his head with a smile, but Mitch ignored it and focused on the baby instead. It didn’t matter, and there was no way to explain it, since he couldn’t figure it out himself. Or rather, he wasn’t prepared to admit it to himself.

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CHAPTER NINE

Never In December

-o0o-

I'd left Mitch's place that morning. The last two weeks, since Joshua's birth, we'd spent even more nights than usual with each other, and Irina was starting to become very curious about it. It was easy to avoid her questions, though, since all I had to do was ask her about her boyfriend. She still didn't like talking about him.

I had the day off, and had planned to spend it with her and do some shopping, but was surprised by Mitch ringing our doorbell.

"Hi?" I almost asked, because I hadn't expected him to come by. "Something wrong?"

"Nope. Just thought I'd take you for a ride."

"Mitch," I sighed. "The cane."

I had to remind him of it quite often. Initially, I had been pleasantly surprised that he always seemed to forget about it. I always expected it to be the thing people remembered about me, but these days it was mostly annoying that he kept coming up with ideas for things I couldn't do.

"Won't need it, I got a plan. Get dressed. Jeans, warm sweatshirt, and I borrowed Lisa's leather jacket for you." He looked into the hallway. "Got any good boots?"

"I have a pair," I heard from behind me, and I turned around to see Irina in the doorway to the kitchen, with a big smile on her face. She walked towards him while wiping her hands on a kitchen towel. She looked extremely pleased, and I knew why—she knew who he was. "Irina."

"Mitch," he answered and took the hand she held out in front of her. "Nice to meet you."

Irina opened the wardrobe in the hallway and held up a pair of knee-high boots. “These okay?”

“Perfect,” he said and looked at me. “You won’t need the cane, and you’ll like it.”

He wouldn’t give in, and since Irina was very keen on the idea of me taking a ride, it wouldn’t be possible to blame her and say that I’d promised her to go shopping or something. She’d just push me out the door to make sure I followed him. With a sigh, I took the boots and sat down on the hallway stool to put them on. Irina fetched me a sweatshirt from my room, and finally handed me Lisa’s leather jacket. When I was done, Mitch came up to me with a backpack.

“You’ll need to take this, too.”

“You’re going to have me carry stuff?” I asked and glared at him.

“Can’t have it on my back if you’re riding with me.” He helped me put it on and then turned around. “Jump up.”

“You better have a helmet for her,” Irina said, but her smile was still huge. I’d never hear the end of this. Riding, and with one of the Baxter boys. Her week was made—possibly her month.

“I do. I’ll keep her safe, don’t worry.”

“I don’t. Have fun, Zvezda.”

He walked out, to the elevator, but he didn’t put me down, and I quite liked his hand on my ass.

“What does Zvezda mean?” he asked.

“Star,” I answered and blushed a little. “She’s called me that since I was a kid.”

“It’s nice.”

“Were are we going?” I asked in return.

“A picnic.”

“In December?”

“Figured you’d never taken a ride or had a picnic in December.”

“No, I haven’t. Can’t even remember the last time I went on a picnic, and I’ve never been on a bike.”

When we came to the bike in question, he put me down on the ground and helped me with a helmet.

“Normally, I’d start the bike before you got up. Think that’s gonna be okay?”

“If I swing my left leg over it, it should be okay.”

“Let’s give it a try.” He started it, and I got up behind him. “Watch out for the exhaust pipe, it gets hot,” he pointed at it, which was good because I wasn’t sure I would have been able to identify it otherwise. “When I stop the bike, you sit tight, don’t put your feet down unless I say otherwise. You sit close to me, hold tight, and lean with me.”

It all sounded insane, and if I’d been reluctant before, I was getting terrified. Glowing hot exhaust pipes and leaning around on a motorcycle!

“Lean with you?”

“When I take a turn, I’ll lean, and you’ll need to follow my movements.”

“Okay.”

He gave me a big smile over his shoulder.

“Babe, I’ll take it really easy, just trust me.”

“Okay.”

I moved as close to him as possible, put my arms around his waist, and hugged him tight. Then he took off.

And he’d been right. I liked it, and after a few turns I stopped being worried about what on earth ‘lean with me’ meant. It wasn’t hard, and it didn’t feel like I’d fall off. He took us out on the highway and after a while turned onto a small road. I had no idea where we were, but then I saw a river. I assumed it was Gila. When he stopped, I remembered

what he'd said about not putting down my feet until he said it was okay, but I let go of his waist. He turned slightly.

“Think you can get off by yourself?”

I put my right foot down and swung my left leg over the bike. It worked okay. He got off after me and turned his back towards me again, and I didn't wait for him to ask me. I got up. If I had to leave my cane behind, he better carry me around. I did give his cheek a kiss, though, and he smiled again.

“I liked it. Riding,” I clarified.

“I know. All girls love riding bitch.”

“Yeah, if you want me to do this again you're gonna have to call it something else.”

“Forget it,” he laughed. “If you wanna ride with me that's what I'll call it.”

“Hmm, I guess I can accept it, since you're carrying me around and everything.”

I noticed a fire pit on the bank, and he threw down a blanket in front of it. I slid down from his back and sat on it, not sure what I was supposed to do. I'd never been much for hiking or... whatever this was. I watched him as he went over to a tree lying a bit further away. He dug around underneath it for a while before pulling out some firewood. He'd definitely been here before.

“What is this place?”

“Dad and Bear used to bring me and Mac here to fish when we were kids. Then Mac and me came by ourselves when we got older. Sometimes to fish or to just hang out and take a break from shit. It's a calm place, and I like it.”

I was a bit surprised that it was a place for his family—for him and Mac. I'd figured he used to bring girls here to get into their pants, but I didn't comment on it, and I didn't ask. I preferred to not know.

“I've never fished,” I mumbled instead.

“You can get pretty tasty fish here.” He dropped the firewood on the ground. “Wanna try?”

“You brought a fishing pole?”

“No.” He returned to the tree and dug around underneath it until he found the pole and held it up with a smile.

“Don’t you need a worm?”

“Not if you’re fly fishing.” He came over again and held out his hand to pull me up. “I’ll show you. Not so sure you’ll like this, though.”

He was right; I didn’t like it much. Fishing was pretty darn boring, and after a while I sat down on a tree trunk close by to watch him doing it while we talked.

“Did you do this often?”

“Nah. Now and then when Dad had the time. Mom or Mel used to give me and Mac a lift out here so we could stay the night alone when we got older.”

“You’re really close. You and Mac.”

“Yeah. We fought and stuff, but... I don’t know. He’s my brother, I’d do anything for him, and I know he’d do the same for me.” He wasn’t looking at me. Instead he kept his eye on the water, which made the questioning easier. “He’s just a great guy. Like, decent. The most decent and kind person I’ve ever met. He’s always been like that. Like with Vi. He was fucking crazy about her, but he still didn’t go there until he was sure she felt the same way. He was worried she was too young. Not sure I would’ve given a shit if it was me.”

“How did he and Vi happen? I mean, they must’ve known each other since they were kids.”

“He took off for a few years to prospect with another charter. When he came back she was sixteen, and he noticed her. He was the one who suggested she should try tattooing.”

“I know. Lisa told me.”

“He tried to be the ‘good guy’ as usual and stay away since... you know, she was young, a brother’s daughter, and

all that. Didn't work out that well, and they hooked up." He smiled. "He was a total goner long before it got serious officially. They're really good together."

"I noticed."

"Fish!"

"What?"

"Got one."

I watched as he struggled with getting the fish out of the water. Once it was flopping on land, he pulled out his knife, got the hook out of its mouth, and then stabbed it through the neck. It was all done quickly and efficiently, so it was obvious it was something he'd done more than once.

"Lunker largemouth."

"A what?"

"That's what it's called. Think I brought salt." He came up in front of me and turned around, still holding the fish in his hand. It didn't look yummy at all. "Come on. I'll start a fire and we can eat it. Brought some other stuff as well."

I watched him start the fire, gut the fish—which was pretty gross—and he drew a stick through it and hung it over the pit. He'd definitely done all this before, and it was *very* strange seeing him like this.

"Is it good?" I asked while looking at the extremely ugly fish.

"Tastes better than it looks, that's for sure," he answered and sat down next to me. "Brought other stuff for you to eat, so you don't have to."

"No, I'll try. Now that you've fished for me and everything."

He reached for the bag and started to pick out beer, some sandwiches, and fruit. I was truly stunned. It was really sweet and a lot like a date. I wasn't sure how to react, so I just thanked him and took the beer he was handing me.

A while later, he took the fish from the fire and gave me pieces of it after carefully picking out the bones.

“The ass pieces are the best ones,” he mumbled while poking around in the fish.

“Ass is always the best piece.”

“Very true,” he laughed. “So how do you like fishing and picnicing in December so far?”

“I’ve missed out,” I admitted. “The fishing wasn’t really my cup of tea, but this is nice. Thank you. Really. For trying to... I don’t know... make me see...”

“There are other things in life than dance?” he tried to help me. “Ever had sex outside?”

“Yes. As a matter of fact, I have.” Once, but he didn’t need to know that. “That question seems a lot more like you than this,” I said and swept my hand around us.

“Hey! Just trying to widen your horizon,” he laughed. “And what do you mean by that? ‘A lot more like you than this.’”

“I don’t know. We don’t usually hang out.”

“You’re the one who asked me to show you things you’ve missed. Just trying to oblige you. Besides, considering all my work, I fully expect to get laid,” he said with a smile and licked his fingers. Then he pointed at the fish. “Want more?”

“Yes, please.” I actually liked it. “It tastes better than it looks, and you’ll get laid.”

He just laughed and gave me more fish. We sat there for a long time. He kept throwing logs on the fire, then went to his bike and came back with another blanket, told me to lean against him and swept the blanket around both of us. I felt him nibbling my ear.

“Ever had sex outside in Arizona?”

“No. And never in December.”

“No?” He moved around and gently laid me down on my back, resting between my legs.

“Never in front of a campfire.”

“Girl,” he murmured into my neck while trying to unzip my jacket, “you’ve been missing out.”

“Starting to realize that.”

I helped him with my jacket, and then got to work on the buttons on his jeans. He didn’t take off my sweatshirt and also only pulled down his own jeans to his knees. After putting on the condom, he grabbed the blanket, threw it over his shoulders, and lay down on top of me. I caught his mouth and moaned into it when I felt him pushing inside. I’d definitely missed out.

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He woke me up by carefully tugging my hair.

“Need to go, babe. How’s the leg?”

I’d put my jeans back on once we were done, since it was pretty cold. We’d been talking for a while before I fell asleep. It seemed to be early dawn, and when I sat up, I noticed he’d already packed everything but the blankets on the bike. I carefully moved my leg.

“Think it’s okay.”

“I’ll give you a quick rub. Need more than okay to hold on while you’re on the bike.”

It was a quick rub, but it helped, and I realized that he’d paid attention to where the bad spots were. When he was done, he helped me up, turned around, and I got up on his back.

“You could just help me by letting me lean on you,” I said with a yawn.

“Nah. If you take a gimp’s cane you better carry her around.”

“I’m not sure I like you calling me ‘Gimp.’” I chuckled and bit his ear. “But I’ll drop it for now.”

“Smart move, or I might drop *you*.”

He put me down by the bike, then went for the last blanket and stuffed it into one of the saddlebags before handing me the

backpack. After helping me with the helmet, he took his own.

“Thank you, Mitch. I had a really good time.”

“Good. That was the point.”

I climbed up and put my arms around him. This time it was more relaxing, since I wasn't nervous, and I noticed how the bike vibrated in a very... exciting way. I leaned closer and put my chin on his shoulder. I saw the smile on his lips. He knew what was going on—I was sure. I bet he took girls on rides all the time just to get them worked up.

The picnic still had me confused. It wasn't that we hadn't talked before, because we had, but so far our meetings had mainly been booty calls. We met, we had sex, and that was it. This was not just sex, it was much more like a date. The main point with this hadn't been the sex, and I couldn't really figure out what he was up to. If it truly was just to show me what I'd missed and make me feel better about things. I appreciated that, absolutely, but I was also a bit scared that us having sex might be turning into something else. And if it was, how I felt about it.

I was also starting to understand what Lisa'd meant about him being fun to be around, and how he was curious about things. He had knowledge about an impressive variety of subjects, and he loved talking, but not in an annoying, self-absorbed way. He just seemed really thrilled to share what he knew, and it was so easy to be relaxed around him.

This was what Lisa had warned me about, though. He was a really charming guy, and I shouldn't read too much into things, so it was probably better if I just accepted that there wouldn't be more than this. He'd show me a good time, and that was enough for now. I needed sex, I needed good times, and he provided both. So maybe I could just enjoy it and not mess it up, or turn it into something huge in my head.

He parked outside the house, and I got off the bike and waited for him to take me inside. When I got up on his back, he squeezed my behind. He definitely knew the bike worked me up, so I took a shot.

“Want to stay what’s left of the night at my place?”

“You okay with that?”

“Yes. Besides, I think Irina knows we’re seeing each other—Or whatever we’re doing—considering how you barged in and basically kidnapped me for a picnic.”

“Probably,” he agreed, as he carried me into the elevator. “I’ll stay.”

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When I woke up with his morning boner pressing against my back, I decided that having him stay had been a great idea. We’d just had really quick sex the night before, since we’d both been pretty tired, and I was hoping he’d make it up to me. He seemed to have the same idea.

“Gotta keep quiet, I think Irina’s up,” he whispered into my ear and pressed harder against me. His hand was traveling down my stomach and through the curls between my legs. “Can I try something?”

“What?”

“I massage you while fucking you. I’ll give you a proper one afterwards.”

“Okay,” I whispered.

His hand squeezed the back of my leg for a while, before gently moving it over his hip so he could reach the inside of the leg. It wasn’t the best massage, but it got rid of the worst cramps. When his hand slipped between my legs, he kissed the side of my neck up to my ear.

“You really are the worst hogger ever, baby.”

“Yeah,” I moaned. “That’s why I gave you your own cover.” I was interrupted when he pinched my clit a little. “Oh, god!”

“You took that, too,” he mumbled in a hoarse voice as I felt his rock hard dick moving back and forth along my slit, but it was just teasing me, not entering me. “So you owe me.”

I angled my hips so he'd slip inside, and we both let out a groan.

"Shit!" Mitch said and pulled out. "Hang on, need a condom."

It was a good thing that one of us was on top of things in the morning, because I hadn't thought about it for a second. I turned to face him, and he was going through his jeans pockets. He took a condom out of his wallet, and smiled.

"Sorry."

"I wasn't thinking about it either," I said and pulled him in for a kiss.

"How's the leg?"

I moved it, and it was stiff as hell, and actually hurt a bit, but I didn't want to complain. I didn't have time to say anything, though.

"Give it here," he said and tossed the condom to the side.

"I'll be okay," I tried.

"I kind of like you flexible as fuck, Gimp, so I don't mind taking a few minutes to make sure you get there."

I laughed and watched him gently start with my calf and move his hands up the leg while squeezing and rolling my muscles between his hands. When he was at the inside of my thigh, I moaned a little, and he smiled, but instead of commenting on it, he leaned down and licked my clit.

"Oh!" was the only thing that slipped out of me.

Still massaging the leg, he continued to lick me, and it was by far the best morning massage I'd ever had.

"Damn it, Mitch," I mumbled. "I'm gonna start getting turned on when I massage myself now."

"Good," he chuckled, moved up to lie between my legs, and reached for the condom. "If I fuck you now, do you promise to do the rest of the exercises later?"

“Yes,” I laughed. “Is this out of concern or do you just want to make sure I stay flexible for you?”

“Both.”

He kissed me and was finally inside me again, but it wasn't a frantic, hurried thing, it was slow and measured thrusts. Every time I opened my eyes, I noticed him looking at me with a smile. Finally he leaned down for a kiss—a long, deep kiss. He grabbed ahold of my ass and kissed my earlobe with a groan.

“Come with me, baby.”

I closed my eyes, tightened my arms around him, and buried my face in the side of his neck. I loved how he smelled there, and how it let me feel his rapid pulse against my cheek. His panting got louder as his dick got even harder inside of me. That's when I felt my own insides tighten around him, and I hugged him harder.

“I'm coming.”

“I can feel,” he groaned. “Fuck, you feel so good, baby. Always.”

I wrapped my right leg around him, held him tight, and tried to contain my scream when I came. With a few grunts, he came just after me.

We lay still for a few moments, and then he gave me a kiss before moving to lie next to me. He got rid of the condom and pulled me closer.

“So I took your cover as well?”

“Yup,” he chuckled. “Threw yours on the floor and then took mine. For a while there I think you actually had both of them.”

“Sorry.”

“No worries,” he said and sat up. “We have the Christmas party and Dad's birthday party next Friday. Think you can come?”

“Will Lisa be there?” I didn’t want to go if she wasn’t there; that would be strange.

“She’ll be there.” He was standing next to the bed and had just pulled up his jeans. Then he got down on the bed again, leaning over me. “I’ll be there, too.”

“I figured you didn’t invite me just to *not* be there.”

“So why do you think I invited you?”

“To get some,” I said and pinched his nose. “Which isn’t something I guarantee.”

He laughed and gave me a kiss. “I need to get to work.”

“Are you ever really at work? As in working, I mean. You usually don’t leave until around ten.”

“We have people who open up for us. I work when I’m there, and I have club stuff most days and often pretty late. So I work.”

Club stuff was work, too? I didn’t really get a lot of these things and frankly, I didn’t really care. If I could wake up like this with him, and he wasn’t in a hurry to leave, that was good. I usually worked nights, and got home around ten or eleven, which was a good time for both of us to meet.

“My parents are coming next Thursday, but I’ll come by if I can.”

“Your parents?”

“Yes, they are coming here to celebrate Christmas. They’ll be here until the beginning of January.” He pulled down the cover, and I laughed when he licked my left nipple with a groan. “What?”

“What are the chances I can convince you to spend a night with me while they’re here?”

I thought about it. The fact that my parents had left before I was even a teenager meant I had never really grown up in their eyes. They’d been a bit shocked when they learned I had moved in with a man a few years earlier (that didn’t last more than two months), or that I had boyfriends at all, and trying to

explain to them about Mitch wasn't something I wanted to do. They also had their mind very set regarding the MC—and it wasn't a positive view.

“I'd say pretty slim.”

“Hmm,” he mumbled, lay back down, and sucked on my nipple. “Next Thursday? Think you can save some nights for me until then?”

“I might be able to do that.” I grabbed his cheeks and pulled him up for a kiss. “Let me know when you're available.”

“I will.” He gave my nose a kiss and got up. I kept looking at him, I couldn't help myself, he really had an amazing body. “Have you ever been to an all you can eat buffet?”

“No,” I laughed. “That's your next idea?”

“Yeah.” He pulled the hoodie over his head. “That okay? Thought we'd catch a matinee afterwards.”

“Okay. Guess I'll be able to sit still after gorging myself at a buffet.”

He smiled, put on the last of his clothes, and threw his backpack over his shoulder.

“See you tonight then?” he asked when he stood at my door.

I couldn't help smiling. “Yes.”

Once he was gone, I lay back down to start with the proper exercises, and I was smiling my way through them. The thoughts from the night before came back, and I knew something was changing, but I didn't want to mess around with those thoughts, yet. Trying to analyze... it felt like it would just complicate things. Even if I tried to remind myself about what kind of a guy he was, I also felt like he was what I needed right now—someone who just made me feel good. And more importantly, someone who made me feel good about *myself*.

I took a shower when I was done and got dressed. I didn't have any big plans, but wanted to go into Phoenix for some

shopping, since I never got around to it the day before, and I figured that missing nice clothes was a bit stupid. I could just buy some. Not a tutu, but just some nice dresses that made me feel as if I at least had some flair in my life.

I heard voices in the kitchen and was surprised when I saw Mitch sitting and talking to Irina.

“She caught me in the hallway,” he said with his mouth full of food while pointing at Irina when he saw me. “Lured me in with pancakes, but said I should leave you alone so you could do your morning stuff.”

Irina held up a cup and a plate with an innocent smile. “There’s enough for you, too.”

I knew she hadn’t said that to Mitch out of the goodness of her heart just so I could do my morning stuff in peace. She’d told him to leave me alone so she could grill him. When I glared, she just winked. She would never apologize no matter what, so I sat down and grabbed some pancakes. Mitch took my cane and started to play around with it while I was eating. He was still talking to Irina, and they seemed to be on the subject of oligarchs. I had no idea why he was so interested in them.

“If Russian mothers had kept reading Afanasyev to their children, there wouldn’t be that many oligarchs,” Irina said.

“What?” Mitch asked.

“Alexander Afanasyev,” I clarified. “He’s to Russia what the Brothers Grimm are to Europe. He collected Russian folktales, fairytales, and fables.”

“Yes,” Irina said and waved her finger towards him. “And in those stories taught you that if you cheat, steal, and lie, you always get what’s coming to you. Or that Baba-Jaga gets you.”

“Baba-Jaga?” Mitch chuckled and looked at me. “Wanna explain that one, too?”

“She’s a witch in the Slavic folk lore. She can be good or evil, but she always punishes those who try to deceive her or have done wrong in some way. She’s in quite a few folktales, in some of them she flew in a mortar and used the pestle as an

oar. But she's not in my favorite tale about the fiddle-playing soldier."

"Ah," Irina sighed. "Beautiful, but so sad. It too teaches that there are no short cuts, though."

Mitch laughed. "I'm gonna wanna hear all of these, and that one especially."

We were interrupted when his phone rang, he picked up, and all he said was 'yes' and 'I'm on my way.' He stood up, emptied his coffee and gave me a kiss on my cheek.

"Call ya, Gimp."

"Stop calling me Gimp!" I yelled after him, but he just waved.

When I turned my attention back to Irina, she had her eyebrows raised.

"So how long have you been seeing him?"

"Uh, I don't know. I'm not sure we're *seeing* each other, per say," I tried. Irina gave me the 'Russian' look. You did not mess with her when she did that one. "About two months. Don't read too much into it."

"I see what I see, a man makes my girl smile."

It wasn't really that easy, but I didn't want to argue with her. I dodged the rest of the questions and went to Phoenix for some shopping and work.

-o0o-

I found some really great dresses, and one that I was definitely going to wear to the birthday party for Brick. It was red lace with a very low cleavage, and the hem ended just over my knees. I'd seen the girls at the clubhouse. I'd be considered a prude in this, but I didn't care either way because I looked great in it. It would also cover the worst scars and the rest wouldn't show if I had stockings. At least I hoped they wouldn't.

Work that night was calm. There would be a premiere of a new play in two weeks, and the people who wanted to see the current one and still hadn't, wouldn't come running until next

week. I'd figured out that the week occurring two weeks before a premier was the calmest one.

Mitch texted me that he was at home, and that he'd be waiting for me. So I went there, rang the doorbell, and... nothing. I rang again and when he still didn't open, I took a few deep breaths, swallowed the disappointment, and turned around. I was halfway to the elevator when I heard the door opening behind me.

"Hey, babe." Mitch was in the doorway, wearing nothing but his jeans. "I fell asleep. You leaving?"

"I thought you weren't at home."

"Told you I was." He came towards me, turned around, and indicated that I should get up. "Next time, call me and give me a shot at least."

"Okay," I said and jumped up. I was starting to really like piggyback riding on him. "I'll call you next time you don't open the door and you've told me to come."

"Good."

"I need to go to the bathroom."

He dropped me off outside it, gave me a kiss, and then turned to go up the stairs to the loft.

"I'll wait for you upstairs," he said. "If you take too long I'll come and haul you away."

When I came upstairs, not fifteen minutes later, he was sleeping again. I didn't want to wake him up, so instead I removed my clothes and slipped under his cover next to him.

CHAPTER TEN

Who's Your Alibi?

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Anna had just left, and Mitch was standing in front of the door just staring at it. He was still completely thrown by the fact that they'd almost spent the night together without having had sex. Admittedly because he fell asleep while she was in the bathroom. When he'd woken up the next morning, she was already out of bed, and the thought of her leaving before they'd had sex at all had made him go after her in almost a panic. He'd found her in the shower and had fucked her thoroughly against the wall, because her just spending the night with him without any sex at all was just out of the fucking question. You did not cuddle through the night with a fuck buddy, you just didn't. Not having sex and just sleeping next to each other was the kind of stuff you did with a girlfriend—not a fuck buddy.

He wasn't an idiot; he knew they were slowly, but at a disturbingly steady pace, venturing away from fuck buddy territory and into something else. But even if he was ready to admit it, she wasn't. Not even close. Besides, he had no fucking idea how to bring that conversation up, 'Hey, how about we say we're not just fuck buddies, but fuck buddies with friend perks?' Like some warped version of friends with benefits.

When the doorbell rang five minutes later, he was still staring at the door, and he assumed it was Anna who'd forgotten her cell on the nightstand as usual.

"I'll get it for you," he said as he opened the door, and halted completely when he stared at two complete strangers. A man and a woman, and the woman made him relax slightly because none of their enemies would bring a woman to take someone out.

“Get what, Mr. Baxter?” the woman said with a sweet smile and held up a badge. “Can we come in?”

“Do you have a warrant?” he asked and shot her a smile. He was very pleased that her reaction made the male gorilla next to her growl.

“Is that really necessary?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“It’s here or the station,” the gorilla said and tried to give him a menacing look, but it mostly made him look constipated.

“The station it is,” Mitch beamed. “Do you want me to go dressed like this?” He indicated the towel he had around his hips.

“You can get dressed.”

“Okay.” He pointed towards the threshold just in front of the two police officers’ feet. “If you step over that, I’ll press charges. Unless it’s you,” he smiled at the woman. “If you want, you can come with me upstairs and watch me get dressed.”

The gorilla grabbed her arm. “She’s staying here with me.”

Judging by the wedding band he wore, the one she lacked, he was married and it wasn’t to her. But they were definitely fucking.

Mitch had often thought to himself that he’d love to get into a poker night at the police station because most of them had no poker face whatsoever as soon as they became angry, and it was oh so easy to get them angry.

He turned around, tore off the towel and walked upstairs with his ass bare, just to throw them both off, and possibly create some tension between them. It would make reading them during the interrogation so much easier.

Twenty minutes later, he was in an interrogation room at the station. He had a cup of coffee in front of him, and before he’d even sipped it, he knew it would taste like shit. It even smelled like shit. He’d been in there alone for the past ten

minutes, and he could hear the two of them arguing outside the door. His flirting and ass show had obviously had some effect.

The Marauders had a standing order to immediately ask for a lawyer, but Mitch didn't want to. Silver, the club lawyer, would tell him to shut up, and he knew he could get more info from the cops by talking, and he knew he'd be able to talk to them without actually *telling* them anything. He also knew they'd keep him waiting for hours before they called Silver, so he decided to make the wait worth it by finding out what it all was about. The only real downside he could see with the plan was that Brick might possibly make a serious attempt at ripping off his balls if he didn't follow protocol.

When they finally came into the room, the woman, who had introduced herself as detective Evans in the car, was holding a file.

"Do you know who this woman is?" she asked and put a few pictures in front of Mitch.

He knew who she was. It was Autumn, and she was *very* dead. It wouldn't take them long to ID her, and when they did, they'd know she worked for them, so saying that he didn't know was just stupid.

"She's one of the strippers at The Booty Bank. She's called Autumn, but I don't think it's her real name."

Evans looked surprised when she answered; she'd obviously thought he'd lie. "No. Her name is Laura Parker."

He or Mech did extensive background checks on anyone they hired, or who just frequented the club. The girls rarely looked the same on the DMV pictures as they did on stage, and Mitch never made an effort to match the DMV girls to the chicks on stage, simply since he remembered what he read.

He knew that Laura Parker came from Fulton, Missouri, her mom had died when she was twelve, her dad served time for killing a ranger in a drunken fit, she had a younger sister who lived in Dallas, and she had dropped out of college after the second semester. But he preferred to not think about those things when he was sticking his dick in her. So he rarely

bothered to figure out which one of the girls was which unless someone had specific questions about one of them. The less he knew, the better.

He looked at detective Evans. “Was that a question?”

“No,” detective Gordon, the male gorilla, muttered. “She was murdered.”

“That’s not a question either, but I can see that.”

“She had numbers written on her torso,” Evans said and slid another picture over the table. “Do you know what this is?”

Mitch looked at the picture, and written on her torso was the number 1.61803. He knew immediately what it was, but shrugged and looked at the cops.

“No.” He didn’t know if they believed him, but he wasn’t going to help them. Not that he had any fucking idea why someone would scribble the Golden Ratio on her. “What are they?”

“We’re working on it.”

Either they didn’t want him to know, or they weren’t familiar with how Google worked.

“When did you last see her?” Gordon asked.

“I can’t remember.”

“According to a few people we’ve talked to, she was seen leaving the strip club with you the night before yesterday.”

It was either a cheap trick from their side, or someone had been lying to them. It could be they’d heard that he’d fucked her on occasion, but then that was true about most of the strippers. Or it used to be, before he started... seeing Anna, or whatever the fuck it was called. Fucking?

Either way, he wasn’t worried about a fake witness. It annoyed him, but it didn’t worry him. It would piss Brick off, though, so for the sake of the fake witness, Mitch hoped he or she was a figment of the imagination of either Evans or

Gordon. Probably Evans, when he thought about it, because he didn't think Gordon had any imagination.

"I didn't," was the only thing he said.

"So you're saying our witness is lying?" Gordon asked.

"Yes I am."

"Why do you guys own a strip club?" Evans asked in a surprising change of subject. He was expecting them to ask for an alibi and hadn't really figured out how to handle that yet, but he was glad for the delay.

"Because we like tits," he said and made a point of looking at hers. "Especially big ones, like yours. D-cup?"

"Everyone knows it's to launder money," Gordon snorted.

"Now, not everyone is happily married with tits readily available and free at ones wish. So some of us like to go to the strip club and get just that. Since we own it, we don't even have to pay for it."

"How did you know I was married?" he asked with a side glance to Evans who looked slightly annoyed. Gordon's marriage was obviously a huge issue. Mitch had no idea why any cop would be stupid enough to fuck their partner, and he was already trying to figure out how the club could use the information to their advantage.

"You're wearing a wedding ring, Sherlock," he answered.

He figured the new line of questioning was a pathetic attempt to gather information while they had a good reason to bring him in. If they kept it up with questions that didn't have anything to do with Laura Parker, he'd simply shut them up by asking for a lawyer.

"What other businesses does the club own?" Gordon asked. That did it for Mitch.

"I want a lawyer."

They both glared at him and got up without a word. He'd be sitting there for hours for sure. He realized it probably would've been a better idea to let them know he had an alibi,

but the ‘don’t give anything to the cops for free’ rule was too firmly imbedded in his spine.

Three hours and half a pack of smokes later, Silver came into the room.

“Must say, Mitch, the fluorescent light really isn’t good for your complexion.” He put his briefcase on the table. “A murder?”

“Apparently.”

“Do you have an alibi?”

“Yes.”

“Did you tell them that?”

“They never asked.”

“Morons,” Silver muttered. “They probably knew you had nothing to do with it and thought they could drag out the interrogation if they didn’t have to write you off.”

Mitch actually hadn’t thought about that possibility, but it made sense.

“Maybe. They claimed they had a witness who’d seen me leave with her the day before yesterday.”

“A lie to get you stressed, and if you’re stressed you might slip. Wonder if I should tell them that just because you’re the youngest, you’re not the easiest to break. How solid is your alibi?”

“As a rock. A ballet dancer and her aunt both saw me pick her up for a picnic. I took her to the river, followed her home afterwards, and stayed the rest of the night at her place. Went from there directly to work. Both her and her aunt saw me leaving around eight-thirty, and I clocked in a eight forty-five.”

“Oh, wow,” Silver smiled. “Alibis like that gives me the biggest hard-on. Works better than Viagra.”

Then he started humming Bruce Springsteen’s ‘The River’ while he went to the door and called for the detectives. When they were all seated, Silver smiled at the two of them.

“Did either of you bother to ask him about an alibi?”

“Do you have an alibi for the night before last?” Evans asked, giving Mitch a bored look, probably expecting him to give a crap alibi.

“Yes. I was with a woman named Anna Dobronravov from around four p.m. to eight-thirty the next day.”

“Would you mind spelling that?” Gordon asked.

“D-O-B-R-O-N-R-A-V-O-V,” Mitch spelled as quickly as possible, and smiled when he noticed Gordon getting lost around the first r. “She lives on 87 Oak Street. Name’s on the door, just look for the one that starts with Dobr.”

He really didn’t like throwing Anna under the bus like this, but he didn’t have much of a choice if he wanted to get out of there. Especially not if someone had said he’d been with Autumn, although he wasn’t fully convinced that it was true. He was getting more and more sure that Silver was right.

They asked a few more questions, but gave up when Silver kept telling him to not answer, and they cut him loose.

“Is the ballet dancer working at the strip club?” Silver asked as they walked towards the car. Apparently giving the client a ride home was included in his charge.

“No. She’s a friend of Lisa’s. You know, Bear’s daughter.”

“And her Aunt isn’t a lonely drunk who smokes menthols and is in desperate need of cash?”

“No. She’s a... something at the Phoenix Ballet. Think it was called a ballet mistress. Like a trainer.”

“Oh my! My dick is so hard it could support a small bridge right now.”

Mitch just laughed and got into the car.

-o0o-

“What fucking part of ‘shut your mouth and ask for a lawyer when a cop looks at you the wrong way’ was hard for your superior brain to comprehend?” his dad yelled the second he saw him.

It was about an hour after Silver had dropped him off at the garage, and he was standing talking to Bull, Bear, and Sisco when his dad finally found him.

“I thought they were just rattling our cage. I didn’t know there was a fucking murder.”

“I don’t give a fuck what you thought. Chapel, everyone, NOW!” He turned to Wrench. “It won’t take long, keep an eye on this place and ask Mel if something comes up.”

“Sure,” Wrench said and turned his attention back to the Toyota he was working on.

With a slightly too firm grip of Mitch’s arm, Brick dragged him over the lot, through the clubhouse, and into the chapel.

“Spill!”

“Autumn has been murdered, someone had said they’d seen me with her the night she was killed—”

“Who?” Brick asked before he was able to continue.

“I don’t know—yet. I got the impression it was something they made up to get me rattled, and Silver said the same thing.”

“Find out for sure. Anything else?”

“She had the Golden Ratio written on her.”

Brick stood in silence for a while before walking towards his own chair at the head of the table.

“What’s that?”

“It’s the number 1.61803.”

“I’m afraid to fucking ask, but what does that mean?”

“No idea. Maybe he thought Autumn was perfection,” Mitch said and chuckled to himself. He looked around the table at the questioning faces. “The Golden Ratio is sort of nature’s formula for perfection. For example, the face on a person generally considered beautiful is mathematically formed according to the Golden Ratio.... Does this matter?”

“I don’t know,” Brick sighed. “First off, does her murder have anything to do with us?”

“Think it would be stupid to assume anything else,” Sisco said. “At least until we get solid proof that it’s not. Also think we should take into account that someone keeps trying to hack our computers, and that we recently had guests from overseas.”

“Servers,” Mech muttered next to Mitch. “They’re trying to hack our... fuck it, it doesn’t matter. Either way, we’ve gone through everything, they haven’t left anything behind, nothing, so there were no subtle messages in the hacking attempt.”

“Did you trace it, yet?” Brick asked.

“They’ve gone through an anonymizer, that’s it.”

“And you can’t unanonymize it?”

“Fucking hope not,” Mech smiled. “That’s the kind of shit we use to stay under radar. He keeps coming back, and he’s not very good, so we’ll get him. He’ll fuck up eventually.”

“Okay. So those numbers are all we have at the moment,” Brick sighed. “What do we know about them? And you shut up,” he said to Mitch. “I wanna know what the others have to say.”

They sat silent, and then Tommy spoke up. “I don’t wanna be that guy, but don’t you think you’re making this more complicated than it has to be? Besides Mitch, how many people would immediately know what those numbers are? Can’t it stand for something else?”

“Google it to see if it can mean anything else,” Brick said and pointed at Mech, who immediately stood up and went outside to one of the computers. No phones were allowed in the chapel, so he had to leave to do it. “You’re on to something, Tommy. Good job, but I think we should also pay attention to what you said about Mitch immediately knowing what it was.”

Mitch had been thinking the same thing. That the message could be directed at him.

“Was she a favorite?” Bull asked Mitch.

“Not really. Don’t think I’ve been with her more than any of the others.”

“Anyone who’s after you especially?”

“Not that I can think of.”

“I know someone.” It was Mac, and he was looking right at Mitch when he continued. “Hump. Do we know where he is now?”

“Hump didn’t know shit about computers, so he didn’t try to hack us,” Mitch protested. “It might’ve been a lame attempt, but it was still someone who knew the basics. No offense, but none of you would’ve been able to do it, and Hump was about as tech savvy as Dad. And why would he kill Laura?”

“The numbers, do they have anything to do with anything of his? Like the account number, phone number, address, anything?” Brick asked.

Mitch sat still and went through the numbers in his head. Any number he could think of, and he came up with nothing. He slowly shook his head.

Mech came back into the room. “Only thing I found was about how the Fibonacci sequence is connected to the Golden Ratio.” He looked at Mach. “Could that be anything?”

“Doubt it. It’s just a sequence. Each number is the sum of the two previous ones.” Mitch shook his head. “Don’t think it’s related to any of this.”

“Okay, then,” Brick said. “We need to have a look at Hump.”

“Uh, Hump?” Mech said and looked properly confused for a few seconds. “Oh, if this is aimed at Mitch it’s probably Hump, you mean. I’ll check.”

“I’ll call Rabbit to see what he knows,” Brick nodded. “Mac, you call your friends in Emporia, see if they have anything to say off the record. And you two do a search.” The last part was directed at Mech and Mitch.

“Hack the cops, too,” Bear said. “Need to keep an eye on what they know about the murders.”

“We’re already in,” Mitch sighed. “But I’ll check.”

He tried to point that out every fucking time they said that, and he had no idea why he kept trying. There was no fucking need to hack their server every time. Once you had root access, you were in until they noticed, and he seriously doubted they’d notice, considering the rootkit they had installed there to keep their poking around hidden. It was hidden in the kernel, and without reinstalling the entire operating system it would stay there. They were as fucking in as they could be short of going to the police academy and infiltrating them that way.

“Who’s your alibi? Should we have a word with whoever it is?” Bear asked, and Mitch really fucking wished he hadn’t, because that was another mess he wasn’t really prepared to talk about.

“Anna,” he mumbled, and Mac laughed next to him. “And no, you don’t need to talk to her.”

“The ballerina?” Sisco chuckled. “Wow! She’s gonna be pissed when the cops come knocking on her door. Might need some comfort, and luckily, she’s just my type.”

“You have a type?” Brick asked him.

“Sure. Tits and no dick,” Sisco said while giving Brick the finger.

Mitch knew that telling Sisco to stay the fuck away would only make it worse, so he kept his mouth shut. He also knew that Sisco was probably right. Anna would be pissed, and he hadn’t been able to get hold of her since the cops had released him.

When the meeting finally closed, his mind was miles away. He waited while the others left, and as suspected, his dad waited along with him.

“You think it’s Hump?” he asked.

“I don’t know, but I do think it’s something we need to have a look at.”

“I guess it makes sense that if he blames anyone, it would be me. But I still don’t think he was the one on our server.”

“He might’ve found friends, Mitch. I’m not taking any chances, and neither should you.”

“What do you mean?”

“Keep an eye on that girl you’re seeing.”

“I’m not *seeing* her.”

“Okay. Keep an eye on your alibi then,” he said and gave Mitch a wink as he stood up. “You might need her again.”

“The two detectives in charge of the case are fucking, and one of them is married,” Mitch said.

Brick looked at him for a few seconds and then he nodded. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

I Pulled a Muscle

-o0o-

I closed the door behind the two detectives and took a deep breath. That had been extremely uncomfortable and strange. And... heartbreaking, too. I'd noticed Mitch's calls, but had just turned off the sound on my phone. I didn't want to talk to him while the police were still in my apartment.

Actually, I wasn't sure if I ever wanted to talk to him again. I had never before been questioned by the police, and I'd had no idea how to act or what the appropriate response or reaction should be. They had looked very surprised when I offered them coffee, so that was apparently the wrong thing to do.

They'd asked me what I'd done the night before yesterday. I wasn't stupid enough to not know how Mitch and the other Marauders felt about the law, but I was obviously stupid enough to not know how I was supposed to handle the police in my house when they asked me questions that somehow involved him. Then I'd decided to just handle it the same way as if I was seeing just anyone, and told them whatever they wanted to know. Which was if Mitch had been with me, between what hours, and if anyone else had seen us together. The only time I got stressed was when they mumbled about talking to Irina, and I asked them if they kindly could *not* do that because I would really prefer it if she didn't know the police had talked to me about Mitch already, but I doubted they would give a damn about my wishes.

I hadn't asked why they wanted to know, and they hadn't told me. I didn't want to know. I felt really betrayed and stupid, and I just wanted them out as soon as possible so I could simply put the entire thing behind me.

I continued to ignore my phone the entire day, and when Irina asked who pissed in my cornflakes that morning, I almost

bit her head off, which made me feel even worse. I went to bed early but had serious problems falling asleep. My brain just wouldn't shut up.

I was wondering just how fooled I had been, and if the elaborate date had been nothing more than an alibi. All the confusing thoughts I had just after the picnic returned with full force, and I felt so stupid.

Initially I had read between the lines of what Mitch was saying, or just ignored it, but somewhere along the line, I'd let my guard down. It wasn't so surprising when I thought about it in retrospect. It had been nice to be around someone who'd never known me as a dancer.

I had obviously thought it was more than it was, the picnic especially, and as much as the thought of it possibly being something more than sex stressed me, it still annoyed me that I had fallen for his charms.

More than anything, I wanted my head to just shut up, and I wanted it to be all his fault, but it was just as much my own fault for having forgotten what it was all about and who he was.

I was still upset when I woke up the next morning and it didn't get better after checking my phone. He'd called and texted me several times during late evening and early morning.

I nearly pulled a muscle while I was stretching. Stretching while angry is a really, really bad thing, and it wasn't the first time I'd done it, either. The thought of this being about the hundredth time a man's behavior caused me to pull a muscle made me even more angry at the entire male side of the human species.

After breakfast, I hobbled outside to wait for Brett to pick me up for physical therapy, and obviously Mitch was waiting for me, leaning against his bike with his arms crossed over his chest. I took a firmer grip of my cane than necessary to keep myself from repeatedly slamming it over his bike, because that would most likely make him furious.

“You're ignoring my calls, Gimp.”

“How astute of you. Yes, I am.”

“I’m sorry about the cops, I really am, but I had to tell them I’d been with you.”

“I don’t give a damn about the police or what you told them. You could’ve just asked me to your place instead of turning it into a huge thing if you wanted an alibi.”

“You think I took you to the river because I wanted an alibi?” he asked with a questioning and quite mocking smile. “No offense, but that’s stupid, baby. I didn’t even know I needed an alibi. I took you there because I wanted to, and it was you who asked me to stay the night at your place afterwards. I tried to sneak out in the morning, but I’m pretty sure Irina was waiting for me.”

“She probably was,” I muttered.

“So let me get this straight, you thought I took you out for a picnic, caught a fish for you, fucked you in front of a campfire—all to get an alibi?”

“That’s a bit paranoid, isn’t it?”

“Yup,” he agreed. He was standing right in front of me by then, and he was smiling. “Also a bit insulting. I’m not that much of an ass. Besides, I don’t need to *fix* alibies, and definitely not for this thing. I had nothing to do with it.”

I glared at him. “Then what was the picnic?”

“Crossing things off of that list I’ve made for you. Picnic and fucking outside in December.”

“You could’ve warned me about them coming.”

“They kept me at the station for hours, so I couldn’t.” He leaned down closer to me. “Am I off the hook?”

“I’m not sure.”

I really wasn’t sure, and I had no idea how to deal with it all. I just... I needed him away for a while to let me think about it, and I’d been angry with him for quite a while, so I needed time to calm down. He was right, it was a bit paranoid of me to think it was just about getting an alibi. It was

definitely mostly based on my prejudice about him being a biker, but I still wasn't convinced that I was that much off track either. Maybe about the picnic, but I'd managed to completely forget who he was and what kind of people he had around him. I knew he was an outlaw, but I'd chosen to completely ignore that, and having the police knocking on my door had been a blunt wake-up call from reality.

When I looked up from the pavement, he was still looking at me, waiting for my answer.

“What happened? Why did you need an alibi?”

“A girl working at our club was killed.”

“As in murdered?” I stared at him. I hadn't expected that, and I honestly didn't think he'd had anything to do with a murder. “Someone was murdered?”

“Yes.”

“Oh!” I wasn't sure what to say. “I'm sorry.”

“If you let me take you to that buffet I've been talking about, I'll tell you as much as I can.”

“You want to take me to a buffet after finding out that someone you knew has been murdered?”

“I didn't know her, Gimp. I knew who she was, but that was pretty much it.” He smiled again when I kept glaring at him. “Where are you heading?”

“PT. He's picking me up here.”

“Yes he is,” Brett said with a cheerful tone, and when I turned around he had the biggest smile. He took a step forward and extended his hand. “I'm Brett, her physical therapist.”

“Mitch,” he answered and took the offered hand before turning back to me. “Want me to pick you up from there?”

“Um—“ I started, but didn't get to finish.

“That would be great!” Brett said. “It would save me the trouble.”

“But—” I tried again, to point out that Brett wasn’t the one giving me a lift home, but once again I didn’t get the chance to finish, or even start, the sentence.

“What time?” Mitch asked, and he still wasn’t looking at me.

“In an hour. I’ll warm her up for you.”

Before I had a chance to say anything at all, Mitch gave me a kiss and told me he’d wait for me outside. When I tried to talk to him, he started his motorcycle, pointed at his ears, and shook his head to indicate he couldn’t hear me. I wasn’t sure if I should laugh or be furious when I turned to Brett.

“What was that?”

“Brotherly bonding. Come on.”

Brett picking me up had started when I agreed to switch my Thursday appointment for the guy living in the middle of nowhere. When I’d agreed, it had meant I was Brett’s first patient on Thursdays, and as a thank you, he had told me he would pick me up in the morning. When the patient’s wife, Anita, had heard about it, she’d told me she’d take me home each time after my appointment. She argued that she didn’t really have anything else to do while waiting for her husband. I honestly didn’t think switching an appointment mattered all that much, but if it made her feel better, it was okay with me. It was a lot better than the bus and saved me the cab fare.

“Dear lord, woman, what have you done?” Brett exclaimed about twenty minutes later.

“Oh, I think I pulled a muscle.”

“You think? Did you fall out of the bed and break the fall with your bad leg?”

“No, not exactly.” Brett put his hands on his hips and stared at me imperiously. “I stretched while I was angry.”

He rolled his eyes and went back to work on my muscles.

-o0o-

I stared at Mitch’s plate, and then at mine before I started to laugh. His plate was stuffed with food, and he had balanced

things on top of each other to be able to fill it with as much as possible.

“Are you kidding me?” I asked.

“Hey, I got this shit down, you’re the one who’s not doing this buffet thing right, Gimp,” he said and pointed at my plate. “You need to go for the expensive stuff. Like salmon and shrimp, not salad.”

“I can’t eat that much.”

“If you’re not feeling sick when we leave, the restaurant won. Go back for more! I’ll wait here.”

When I came back to our table, he gave my plate another disapproving glare and shook his head.

“I can’t eat more than this,” I said.

“This is going to suck,” he muttered. “I’m gonna have to eat for you, too, to make sure we beat the restaurant.”

I watched him eat for a while, and then cleared my throat to sort of psych myself into asking the things I was wondering about.

“Did you know her, the girl who was murdered?”

“Is this your subtle way of asking if I’ve had sex with her?” he asked.

“Yes. I think it is.” I looked down at my still fairly full plate. “Lisa has told me about the strippers and how they’re often your... sweet butts, I think she called it.”

“Yes, they are, and yes, I’ve had sex with her, but not in over two months. You’re pretty horny, honey, you keep me *very* occupied.” When I blushed, he laughed. “I’m not complaining.”

“Is that why they questioned you?”

“It might be, at least part of the reason, but I think it was mostly because the club owns The Booty Bank, so I’m one of the owners.” He said and looked at me. “Which makes me her boss. You’re not eating.”

“I’m full. I can’t eat anymore.”

“Well you’re a waste of money at a buffet. I thought you ate loads now when you don’t have to starve yourself.”

“Dancers don’t starve themselves. It would be idiotic to do that. Our body is our tool, and it needs energy to work and not get injured. We just maintain a very specific diet, but we eat a lot of calories.”

“Sore spot?” he asked. “I’m pretty sure I’ve heard about dancers who starve themselves.”

“There are girls everywhere who starve themselves, regardless of their occupation. Dancers are skinny, but that’s because we work out ten hours a day. A dancer who starves is about as smart as an Olympic athlete doing it. And before you say anything, I know some of them do.”

“You’re pissed at me again.”

“I’m just fed up with trying to explain that I never starved myself. I looked like that because I trained all the time, and I kept a healthy diet.” I sighed. “Also, you told me you’d let me ask you questions, and you’re not.”

“I’m just saying you were really fucking skinny.”

“Yes, I was.”

I kept forgetting that he’d seen the recording of La Bayadère. But it also didn’t escape my notice that he was completely ignoring any questions I had, and... I didn’t know what to do. If I should just give this crap up and leave him at his damn buffet, with his ridiculously full plate, and head home. Or if I should insist.

“You were also very hot in those red harem pants.” He winked. “And that short skirt that was, like, straight out.”

I sighed and pushed my plate to the side, not to leave—not yet—but just to indicate I’d had enough, of both food and bullshit.

“Yup. You’re pissed.” He shoved his plate to the side, too, and rested his elbows on the table with a sigh. “Okay. Ask.”

“Was she murdered because she was working for you?”

“I don’t know why she was murdered, and that’s the truth. But I do know that civilians aren’t usually the targets for the people who could be after us. Most people like me—”

“Like you?”

“Babe,” he shook his head, “I can’t go into detail, and you have to know why. Some things you’re just going to have to trust me when I say.”

I wasn’t sure how to trust someone I just barely knew, but I still nodded.

“This doesn’t have to be that damn complicated,” he continued. “We have sex, and I show you things you’ve missed because I told you I would. That’s all there is. This shit with the cops was just bad luck. If I’d had time, I would’ve gotten a different alibi, but they picked me up about five minutes after you’d left yesterday morning.”

“A different alibi?”

“It’s not that hard,” he smiled. “I would’ve left you out of it if I could’ve.”

“I told them everything I knew.”

“Good. You did the right thing, and you had nothing to hide.”

I wasn’t convinced, and it didn’t escape my notice that he hadn’t actually answered any of my questions besides the really basic ones. I also wasn’t sure if he was telling me the truth, but maybe it could be that simple, and as long as I viewed what we had going as something casual, I could ignore the rest and stay in the bubble I’d kept around us. I wasn’t *in* his world. At least that’s what I told myself, and frankly, I wasn’t sure I could give him up just yet. I nodded.

“It’s called a tutu,” I said.

“What?”

“The short skirt, it’s called a tutu.”

“It was nice, I could see your entire ass, but the tights and the cup on the guy...” He shook his head. “Not a good look on any dude.”

“Makes their ass look nice.”

“I didn’t notice.”

I laughed and then looked at him. “Okay. We keep it simple, and I won’t ask you any unnecessary questions. Casual and simple.”

Frankly, I wasn’t sure it would work in the long run, but I figured it could work for now, and this had never been a long-term solution any way.

“Let’s go get some candy for the movie,” he said and stood up.

“You’re going to eat more?”

“Everyone knows that the food stomach and candy stomach are two different things.”

“I can’t, Mitch. I really can’t.”

“Okay,” he took my hand. “Movie first, chocolate later.”

-o0o-

“Can I ask you something?” I asked as I stared at the shelf full of chocolate bars in front of me.

I’d hoped it was a joke, but after the movie, he’d taken me to buy candy. I wasn’t sure if I was capable of eating after the buffet, since it was still hard for me to move, I was so full.

“Don’t tell me you’ve never had chocolate.”

“Of course I’ve had chocolate!” I turned and looked at him, but he was busy picking out chocolate bars, and I decided to drop it. I had been planning on asking him if he’d just said he didn’t have sex with others to make me feel better, or if it was the truth. “Did you like the movie?”

“You’re a shitty liar, Gimp. Good thing you decided to tell the cops the truth.”

“You do know it’s really rude that you keep calling me ‘Gimp’?”

That’s when he turned, put his arm around my waist, and gave me one of those nice smiles. “It’s not. It could be rude, but it’s not, and you don’t mind. You wouldn’t even have pointed it out if you hadn’t been pissed that I caught you trying to lie to me.”

“I wasn’t lying. I changed my mind about what I wanted to ask. Let’s just drop it.”

“Let’s.” He pushed the chocolate bars into my hand. “Now, number three on my list is shoplifting. Put these in your bag. I’ll cover you.”

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CHAPTER TWELVE

Dr. Mitch

-o0o-

Mitch was at the clubhouse; it was his dad's birthday and the annual Christmas party. He was trying to keep an eye on the door, so he could catch Anna when she arrived.

It had taken her a few days to fully get over the murder and having been questioned by the cops, but she'd seemed fine by the time her parents had arrive and she'd had to ditch him to spend time with them. He'd talked to her on the phone a couple of times, though.

He might've said it was about sex and him showing her things she'd missed, but that was complete fucking bullshit. He knew they were beyond fuck buddies, and he also knew he was falling in love with her. 'A total goner,' as he'd once labeled his brother's feelings towards Vi. Watching Anna at an 'all you can eat' buffet, laughing about the amount of food on his plate, holding her hand through a shitty movie, and ending their day out by tricking her into shoplifting some chocolate bars had pretty much cemented it. He was crazy about her, which was the main reason he'd been so dead set on making sure she wanted to keep seeing him.

Her eyes when he'd told her to put the sweets in her bag, that he'd cover her, had almost made him laugh his ass off. But he kept a serious face and when she'd still hesitated, he'd grabbed ahold of her, kissed her while slipping them into her bag, and they'd walked out.

"I did not *not* shoplift because of ballet, I didn't do it because I'm not a *thief!*" she'd yelled as soon as they got outside, and she'd done it while throwing the chocolate bars at him.

"You are now," he'd chuckled and kissed her again. She had laughed about it later. At least a little.

When she finally arrived at the Christmas party, it took him a few seconds to recognize her. She was wearing a red dress, showing the most amazing fucking cleavage. Her hair was up in the usual bun, but she had long earrings and stunning makeup. She'd worn makeup before, but not like this, and he'd never seen her with long earrings. He decided that she should wear earrings all the time, because they made her neck look even longer.

"Tell me she dumped you, or that you're at least just fucking," Sisco muttered next to him. "Look at those legs!"

Oh, he'd seen them, and not only now when she was wearing that dress. He fucking loved her legs. Not just because of how they looked, but just as much because of what she could do with them—or what he could do with them. He turned to Sisco.

"She didn't dump me and stay the fuck away."

"Thought so," he heard Sisco chuckle behind him as he walked away.

She was holding a bag in her hand, and it looked heavy. He stopped a few feet from her.

"What's in the bag?"

"A present for your dad."

"Why?"

"You said it was his birthday."

She looked confused, like it was the most obvious thing in the world that she'd bought *his dad*, who she didn't know, a birthday gift.

"We like to party and this is mostly a Christmas party, so you didn't have to, Gimp."

"No," she smiled. "But it's the polite thing to do."

That's when his dad came over to greet Anna. "The ballerina." He gave her a quick hug. "Well, you look stunning!"

“Thank you and happy birthday,” Anna said and handed Brick the bag. “I hope you like it. I honestly wasn’t sure what to give you.”

Brick opened the bag and a smiled. “Beer?”

“Yes. It’s a Spanish bear—or a lager. Apparently the best one they have. That’s pretty much all I can tell you about it,” Anna laughed. “And please don’t ask me what it means that it’s a lager.”

“Spanish?”

“Yeah, I asked my dad to buy the best beer Spain had to offer, and he bought that.” Now she looked a little embarrassed. “Dad is more of a wine man, so I wouldn’t hold my breath about it.”

Mitch noticed that Brick looked impressed, and somehow that made him proud.

“That’s really nice. Thank you,” Brick said and gave her another, slightly longer, hug. “What can I get you, girl?”

“A beer, any beer is fine. You can keep those for yourself.”

Brick handed Mitch a bottle of the Spanish lager, and he looked at it. Estrella Damm, he’d never heard of it. He opened it and took a mouthful. It was good, and he and Brick nodded to each other at the same time.

“That’s a nice lager, Anna,” Brick said. “Really nice of you, darlin’. Get the lady a beer, son.”

Mitch nodded and grabbed Anna’s hand before walking her over to the bar. He made sure she had a beer of her own and then handed her his bottle of Estrella Damm.

“Taste it.” He watched her take a sip. “So how are things with your parents?”

“Okay,” she nodded, handed him the bottle back, and then sighed. “They’re very... careful. I’m guessing they’re still not used to the idea of me not dancing and think I’ll break apart if they mention anything even remotely related to ballet. Which doesn’t leave us much to talk about, to be honest.”

He assumed this wasn't the time to point out that she actually still did break apart a little when ballet was mentioned. Not completely, but a little. Instead, he leaned his elbow on the bar and took a closer look at her. She was amazingly sexy, and his eyes kept going back to her cleavage.

Since the day after the cops had come and picked him up, when she'd ignored him, and until her parents had arrived, they'd spent every night together, and he'd liked that. His dad was starting to complain a little about him always coming in late for work, but most of them were late more often than not. They worked at the garage, but they all knew their real work was the club business. For the garage business they had employees.

With the finances, keeping an eye on the cops' murder investigation, doing his own murder investigation, trying to find Hump, doing constant extra searches through their servers and computers, giving lessons to the slightly less tech-savvy members to make sure they used their computers safely, being woken up a few nights a week to check the moron trying to hack their server, and setting up safe communications with the Dutch club—the list went on, but with all that, he figured he'd earned the fucking right to come in around ten each day. And he knew no one would argue with him about it, but they were all curious as fuck about Anna. Naming her as his alibi had sort of been to throw her under the bus as far as the club went, and he hoped they'd be good to her.

“You look great,” he finally said when he for the tenth time was caught staring at Anna's impressive cleavage. “I like that dress.”

“I've noticed, but thank you. I would look better in high heels, but it made the cane too short, and I walked a bit like the hunchback.”

He laughed. “A very sexy hunchback.”

“Thank you,” she mumbled.

“Baby!” Lisa yelled and threw her arm around Anna's waist. “The things that dress does to your ass makes me want to smack you in a jealous rage.” She gave her cheek a kiss.

“You look amazing, why didn’t you wear that when I took you out barhopping?”

Barhopping? What the fuck? When did that happen? But he didn’t get a chance to ask because Lisa dragged Anna out of his way, and he noticed Lisa had been right—Anna’s ass looked fucking awesome in the dress. She disappeared into the crowd and not thirty seconds later his dad was at his side.

“So that’s the alibi and the reason to why you’re always late for work lately?”

“Yeah...” He wasn’t sure what to say. “It’s not what you think.”

“So if I think you’re spending your mornings nailing the ballerina, I’d be wrong?” Brick asked, with an amused smile on his face.

“Uh... No,” he admitted.

“She seems nice. Gotta like a girl who gives me a lager.”

“Who’s the girl?” Mel asked as she put her arms around Brick’s waist and looked at Anna at the other side of the room. “Oh, is that the ballerina? I love her dress!”

“Yes, that’s her,” Mitch said, hoping that Mel was done with the questioning, which she obviously wasn’t.

“I didn’t know you two knew each other, too. Thought she was Lisa’s friend.”

“I’m leaving,” he said, and took his lager from the bar before turning to Mel. “Don’t scare her!”

He kept an eye on Anna, making sure she stuck to Lisa. He didn’t want her walking around alone, not when she looked like that. She talked to Edie a lot again, but Mel was at her side for quite some time, too, and he didn’t miss her interest. Obviously his dad had said something. Mel had been worrying about him and his lack of interest in women other than for temporary fucks. She’d given him the ‘for someone so smart you’re acting like an idiot’ speech more than once. He lost sight of Anna for a few minutes, and he almost swallowed his

bottle when he saw her next to Sisco. It didn't take him many seconds to reach them.

"I've never tried that." Anna smiled at Sisco.

"Tried what?" Mitch asked and cut between them to put his arm around her shoulders.

"None of your concern," Sisco smiled and winked at Anna. "I'll see you around, Swan."

"Swan?" Mitch asked Anna.

"He asked if I'd ever danced the swan in the Swan Lake, and I told him I had."

He was about to ask her again what it was Sisco had talked about and that she'd never tried, but was interrupted when she continued talking.

"I'm on my way."

"On your way where?"

"Home," she smiled.

That threw him off. It made sense, though. He'd hoped she'd spend the night with him, but she'd said she wouldn't while her parents were in town.

"Can't stay a while longer?" he mumbled and moved closer to her. "At least half an hour longer?"

"You're just trying to get some before I leave," Anna laughed and started walking towards the door. "I'll call you."

Mitch took her arm, leaned forwards, and whispered in her ear.

"You saying you won't need any? Gonna be at least four days until I can see you again." He gave her ear a quick lick. "And I'd really like to just hoist that dress up and fuck you from behind with my hand down that amazing cleavage. I've been picturing it *all* night."

She was definitely breathing heavily, and her eyes were closed, but she didn't answer. So he simply took a firm grip around her waist and turned them around. She didn't hesitate

and followed him through the clubhouse, and into his room. The second the door closed, she threw her arms around his neck and kissed him.

“You just paraded me through the clubhouse!” she growled between kisses.

“They all knew anyway,” he chuckled and started to pull her dress up over her hips. “Turn around, baby.”

He took her cane, laid it on the dresser, and then pushed Anna to lie over the desk. He pulled down her panties carefully to not tear her stockings, since he knew she’d hate to have to go through the clubhouse with bare legs. Once they were down, he pressed two of his fingers inside her.

“Shit! Oh my god, Mitch!”

“See,” he said hoarsely, “you would’ve regretted it if you didn’t get some today.”

“I know!” She got up on her elbows and looked over her shoulder. “Admit it, you would’ve been really pissed if I’d left without you getting some.”

He smiled and leaned over her. “I would’ve just come by and introduced myself to your parents.”

“You wouldn’t.” Her eyes widened. “You can’t do it.”

“Relax, baby. I was kidding.”

He moved his hand to her front to find her clit. The other went down her cleavage just like he’d promised, and he pinched her nipple. When he felt how fucking wet she was, he decided he couldn’t wait. He stood up and grabbed a condom.

She looked over her shoulder with glowing eyes and a small smile on her lips, but she didn’t move.

“Fuck, babe,” he groaned and leaned over her. “I’m gonna miss this, so if you see a shot, send me a text. Okay?”

“Okay,” she moaned as he pressed inside her.

He couldn’t take his eyes off her. She was so fucking beautiful. Her earring rested just under her jawline. A few strands had fallen out of her bun. He stroked them to the side

and kissed her just underneath her ear. With her eyes still closed, she smiled.

He straightened up, grabbed ahold of her hips, but kept his eyes on her, flat on the desk, moving with his thrusts, and for the thousandth time that night, it struck him how beautiful she was. He looked down and saw his hands holding her hips, the rounding of her ass, and his dick moving in and out of her. He wouldn't last long, it was all so god damn good, and her insides were already clenching down on his dick.

“Mitch!” Her eyes were still closed, and with a firmer grip of her hips, he slammed inside her. They flew open. “Again!”

He did as she'd asked, and she shrieked once more. “Like that?”

“Yes! Don't stop!”

He definitely wouldn't last long, and he leaned down over her while still pounding into her. He took her hands, interlaced his fingers with hers, and held them over her head. Resting his head on her shoulder, he inhaled her scent and felt her come around his dick. That was it. With a few hard thrusts, he came as well.

He squeezed her hands with a chuckle. It was so fucking good—every time. He gave her cheek a kiss once he managed to find his breath again. She laughed and opened her eyes.

“Definitely would've regretted missing this,” she said.

“Me, too,” he admitted.

He pulled out, gave her ass a smack, and laughed when she turned around and glared at him.

“Do you still need to go, or do you wanna stick around for a second round?”

“I need to go,” she said, as she pulled up her panties. “Mom and Dad know I'm here, and they were very worried about me going to a biker club. They're probably up waiting for me, and I'm really not up for a serious talk with them.”

“Worried that their girl is with the big bad bikers, eh?” She was standing, fully dressed again. He put his arm around her

and pulled her closer to look down her cleavage. Gently, he moved the cloth to the side and gave her nipple a lick. “Sorry, been wanting to do that all fucking night.”

“I’ve noticed,” she said and exposed her other breast as well. “Give me one on this one, too.”

“Awesome,” he groaned and did as she’d asked. “I’m gonna get hard again really soon if you keep doing stuff like this. I’ll follow you outside.”

They got some looks from the others when they walked through the bar, but not many. It wasn’t like what he’d done was something unusual. It wasn’t even unusual to get a blowjob or get laid out in the bar.

He volunteered Wrench to give her a ride home, and when he watched her leave the party all of sudden didn’t seem that fucking awesome anymore.

-o0o-

It was Christmas Day, and he was supposed to be at his dad’s place around two o’clock. He hadn’t heard from Anna at all, so her parents were apparently keeping her busy.

Lisa had attacked him when he’d gone back inside after sending Anna home from the clubhouse. She’d asked him what the fuck he was doing, that he’d promised to go easy on Anna, and now he was working his charm on her. They’d ended up in an argument that had ended with him telling Lisa to mind her own fucking business. He hadn’t talked to her since, and he really hated fighting with Lisa. Almost as much as he hated fighting with Mac, although that wasn’t anywhere near as common.

He’d just woken up when the sound of the doorbell forced him out of bed. He found his jeans from the day before on the floor and went down to answer the door. It was Anna, and it took him a few seconds to collect himself.

“Merry Christmas,” she said with a big smile on her lips. “Thought I’d bring you your gift.”

“If you’re my gift it’s a very merry Christmas,” he said and grabbed her to give her a kiss.

“We’ve got about an hour if you want to, but I do have a present for you, too.”

“Really?”

He’d bought her a gift, too, even if he’d avoided thinking about it since it had been bought, but he would still give it to her. He’d known she’d buy him something, since she seemed very big on buying gifts and also put a lot of thought into them, so he’d made a real effort—probably a bit too much of an effort. At the moment, the hour with her was a lot more appealing than anything she might have bought him, so he decided to not waste any time. He lifted her up and carried her upstairs to his bed.

Forty minutes later, she was resting on his arm naked, and he turned towards her.

“Can I open it now?”

“Yes,” she smiled.

“You like giving gifts, don’t you?”

“Yes,” she admitted with a laugh, leaning over him to get something out of her bag.

It was a small jewelry box, and for a second he was a bit disappointed. He had some rings and necklaces, but in general he wasn’t much for jewelry. He opened it, though, and then took a deep breath. It was a simple, coin-sized medallion on a leather strap. The inscription on it said *Godfather, JMB*, and the date of Joshua’s birth.

“Wow,” he mumbled as he took it out of the box. “This is so fucking great, Anna.”

“I thought you’d like it.” She took it from him and helped him put it on. “It’s silver. You don’t really strike me as a guy who likes gold jewelry.”

“No, I don’t.” He grabbed her cheeks and kissed her. “It’s awesome. Thank you. I got you something, too.”

“You bought me a present?” She looked honestly surprised.

“Sure. Knew you’d buy me something. I’ll go get it for you.”

He got up and went downstairs to get it. When he came back upstairs, she looked at him with wide eyes. Still looking confused and a bit surprised.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

She sat up and took the box. It was a small gold babushka on a necklace, engraved with a flower pattern similar to the one she had on her cane. He’d found it at a flea market in Emporia on their latest run. Hanging next to it was a small pink heart. It was actually a diamond heart, but he figured it was better if he didn’t tell her that. It would involve him telling her that he didn’t exactly pay full price for diamonds.

He’d bought it directly from the Mexican contact. It was while he was paying for it that he’d realized exactly how gone he was for Anna. Mac had been with him, and when he’d looked at his brother and let out a deep sigh, Mac had laughed. ‘Just figured it out?’ he’d chuckled. And Mitch had been forced to admit that he had, and Mac’d just shook his head. When Mitch, a week earlier, had admitted that he’d taken Anna to their spot by the river the night when she was his alibi, Mac hadn’t even bothered commenting on it.

So that was why he’d avoided thinking about her Christmas present. It was a very clear reminder of how fucking gone he was for her.

“It’s beautiful,” Anna mumbled. She looked up and smiled. “Pink heart?”

“Very ballerina, pink and a heart, then there’s the Russian part,” he hurried to say to take her focus off the pretty fucking overly blingy diamond, and also hoping she didn’t realize it was a diamond. “Can you put it on or is it going to make your parents ask you questions?”

“I don’t care, I want it on,” she smiled. “Thank you.”

He fastened it on her and gave her a kiss. She looked pretty pleased when she ran her fingertips over it, and he liked that.

Then she straddled him, put her arms around his neck with a smile, and gave him a quick kiss. He thought he deserved a better one, so he circled her waist and pulled her closer, to make sure he got a proper kiss. Having her naked in his lap with his tongue in her mouth was making him hard again. She laughed and rubbed herself against his dick.

“I need to go.”

“Sure?” he groaned and arched to press his now solid hard-on against her. Grabbing her new necklace, he forced her to get closer and licked her lips. “Can you at least say something in Russian?”

“Schastlivogo Rozhdestva!”

“More.” It was so fucking hot. She’d done it a couple of times when he’d asked her, and she had started to figure out that it turned him on. He moved them around so he was on top of her. “Please?”

“Vot der’mo!” she said and laughed.

“What does that mean, the last one?” He sneaked his hand between them and found her nub.

“Oh shit!”

“Come on, baby,” he teased and sucked on her lower lip. “Tell me.”

“That’s what it means,” she moaned. “It means ‘oh, shit.’”

He was pretty damn sure he could get her to stay a bit longer. He watched her as he slowly moved two fingers inside her, her eyes closed and lips slightly separated. It was at times like this he knew exactly how fucking in love with her he was. It would freak her out, though, if she knew. She was in no way ready for love declarations or a relationship, so he needed to take this very slowly.

“Babe, ever spent an entire day in bed?” he asked while putting on a condom.

“No,” she said and opened her eyes. “Never had time for that.”

He lay down, gave her a kiss, and smiled as he pressed inside of her. “We’ll do that when your parents have left.”

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He dropped the huge bag of Christmas presents on the floor in the living room. The kids were examining the gifts already surrounding the tree. Eliza was the first to come up to him, and she gave him a long, tight hug.

“How’s my girl?” he asked and kissed the top of her head.

“Good. Sort of. I never heard from that guy again.”

“The slightly older one?” he asked.

“That one,” she confirmed. “I didn’t tell him I had a purity ring, but something similar, so I guess you were right.”

“Sorry, Buttercup.” He gave her a hug. “Want me to beat him up?”

“No. Not yet,” she smiled. “I’ll be fine.”

“I know.”

He gave her an extra hug, put his arm around her shoulders, and started them towards the kitchen.

“How does the turkey look?”

“They won’t even let me near it. The new rule is that you have to be a mother and not be married to Dawg to be allowed to touch it.”

The ‘not married to Dawg’ rule was obviously to keep Edie out of the kitchen, since the woman was capable of fucking up a salad.

“Did you make desert?” Eliza was great in the kitchen, though. Mel had made sure of that. She wouldn’t be able to stand the shame of having a kid who couldn’t cook; family dinners were sacred to her. “And tell me it’s good.”

“I made it, and it’s *awesome!*”

They both stood in the doorway to the kitchen, and he remembered listening to Eliza trying to explain to one of her friends how the families were tied together. It was a mess and

no one really gave a shit; usually they just said ‘he’s club,’ ‘she’s an old lady,’ or ‘club kid’ and that was enough of an explanation.

When Lisa looked up, he gave her a smile. Instead of smiling back, she put down the ladle, marched up to him, grabbed his arm, and pushed him out on the porch. He stood there and stared at her as she slammed the door shut hard enough for the glass to vibrate. His smile had been meant as an apology, and he’d hoped they’d have a talk about how silly they’d been and that it was all good. Well, that was obviously not going to happen, and he braced himself for the verbal storm she was sure as fuck going to unleash on him.

“A diamond. A pink, heart-shaped diamond! What the fuck are you up to?”

“How did you...?” And it dawned on him. Mac knew and if Mac knew, Vi did and Lisa was Vi’s sister. Or it was possible that Mac had told her; the three of them rarely kept secrets from each other. “Shit. Lisa—”

“She’s had a shitty few years, and I wasn’t kidding, if you fuck her up I’ll rip your balls off.” Lisa wasn’t yelling, but only because she didn’t want the rest of the family to hear. “She’s a nice person, a friend, and I love her. If you mess her up, and she starts avoiding me just to stay out of your way, I’ll hate you forever.”

“I don’t think you have to worry. She’s not falling, don’t think she’s capable at the moment. There’s still a bit too much in her head.”

“Okay. Just...” He could see when realization hit her. “*She’s* not falling. You are.”

“Drop it.”

Lisa started laughing. She’d make a great villain in a movie with that laugh. He lit a smoke while he waited for her to calm down.

“I’m sorry,” she sniffed while drying her eyes.

“No, you’re not.”

“No, I’m not.” She sat down on a chair, and he took the one opposite her. “So, what now?”

“Nothing. I’d just scare her off. She needs time. Dancing is still her big love.”

“When the fuck did you become an expert on women?” Lisa asked and took the smoke from him with a big smile on her lips. “Dr. Mitch.”

“Nailing girls and getting away without tears has been my hobby for years. Knowing when they’re prime for the picking makes it easier.” He wiggled his eyebrows. “And I’m *very* good at my hobby.”

“You’re an ass.”

“Yeah, but you knew that. This thing with Anna would’ve been perfect if I hadn’t...”

“...Fallen for the girl,” Lisa finished the sentence and shook her head with another laugh. “Didn’t think I’d see the day when Mitchell ‘horndog’ Baxter fell in love. Why her?”

“I don’t know,” he shrugged. “She’s different.”

“Gonna tell you a secret, Mitch. Sister to brother secret,” she said and leaned closer to him. “All men say that, ‘she’s different.’ Wanna know the truth?”

“Yes,” he smiled and leaned forward as well. “Enlighten me, Dr. Warren.”

“She’s not. It’s those love goggles that makes her different. In the end, she’s normal, just like any other girl. It’s just that she’s *your* kind of normal, and you’ve fallen for her.” Lisa stood up and gave his cheek a kiss. “Good luck.”

And she was gone. Mitch sighed and leaned back on the chair. That’s when it dawned on him, Lisa had known about the diamond, but she hadn’t known why he’d bought it. Mac had kept that to himself at least, and Mitch liked that.

The door flew open again and this time it was Brick.

“Wanna tell me why the crazy doc almost broke the fucking door to my porch?”

“She was pissed.”

“I got that part, genius. More wondering why she’s pissed at you.”

“Wanna make me a cup of hot chocolate and have a heart to heart?”

“Fuck you,” Brick laughed and sat down on the chair Lisa had occupied just a few minutes earlier. “You gonna be okay?”

“Yeah, Dad, I’ll be fine.” He took the smoke his dad was offering despite just having finished one.

“Any news about who the witness is? The one they claimed saw you taking off with Laura the day she was murdered.”

“Can’t find any record of her, so I think they lied.”

“Son,” Brick said and took a deep breath. “This is about you, and no matter what you think about Hump’s computer skills, that has something to do with him, too.”

“I know, but we can’t find Hump. Mac has talked to some of the Emporia guys, and they have no idea where he disappeared. He checked out from the hospital, and no one has seen him since, but that’s not something they thought about, since it’s the way it should be.”

If a member left in bad standing, the way Hump had, no one would contact him again. The person was considered dead to the club.

“Brick, honey,” Mel said from the door. “I need you.” Then she was gone.

His dad sighed, and when Mitch gave him a mocking wink, he pointed at him.

“Christmas with the family means you can’t hide from the fucking chaos out on the porch. If I’m locked in there, you are too, kid!”

“Don’t try,” Mitch said as he stood up and put out the smoke he’d just barely lit. “You love having these big family things.”

“I do, but I want all my kids with me, so get your ass inside.”

“Yes, Dad.” Brick grabbed his neck as he passed and gave him a look. “What?”

“You sure you’re okay?” he asked in a low voice.

“I’ll be fine, Dad. Let me sneak out for a joint later and I’ll be fan-fucking-tastic.”

“Oh, I’m gonna need that too,” Brick muttered and they walked inside together. “I love your sister, she’s my baby girl, but she is not a calm spirit.”

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

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The Dobronravovs had adapted to the American way of celebrating Christmas long before I was born, so we were serving turkey. Some Russian dishes were added, but it was still a pretty classic American Christmas table. We had lymonnyk for desert, though, but that was just because both Mom and I loved it. Besides, it was more of a Ukrainian dish.

“Petr, darling, hand me the wine,” Mom said, and Dad handed it to her with a smile.

My dad was a tall, dark man. He was built like most dancers, which meant he was muscular, and he was quite handsome. I’d inherited his brown hair, but the red streaks in it and my blue eyes were from Mom. She was a strawberry blonde with blue eyes, and I’d always thought she was the most beautiful woman on the planet.

They’d met when they had the leads in *Romeo and Juliet*, which was so cliché it was almost ridiculous, and I was born just over a year later. I was obviously not a planned child, but they’d never told me that and I’d never felt unwelcome—quite the opposite.

Mom, Yekaterina, but these days Katarina, had grown up in Russia, trained at the Vaganova Academy, and come to America when she was just twenty. Leaving Russia had been considered a huge betrayal, of course, and some people had thought she was insane—her own parents included. She had never been very keen on Russian culture, not the way Dad and Irina were. She said it was different when you’d grown up in the communist version of it and had seen it from a much less romantic light, and I could see the logic in that.

“Someone at the supermarket mentioned that there had been a murder,” Dad said, and I held my breath while staring

at the table.

I *prayed* that Irina wouldn't mention me in any way. The police had talked to her, I hadn't gotten away from that, but she'd taken it fairly well, and I exhaled in relief when she tried to cover for me.

"Maybe this isn't a suitable topic of conversation for a Christmas dinner, Petr," she suggested while handing me the mashed potatoes with an encouraging smile.

"Was it someone we knew?" Mom asked. "I just want to know if it's someone we knew," she clarified to Irina.

"No. It was someone from that club those bikers own. Poor girl."

I had somehow managed to recreate the mental bubble around whatever Mitch and I had going on. I never thought about outside things when I was with him. It was just the two of us having sex, crossing things off my list. That's how I dealt with the entire murder and MC business, too. But hearing it from my Dad made it much more real. It was an actual woman who had died. She was someone's daughter, had been important to people, and she now was gone.

"It's always the women paying the price for men's deeds," Mom sighed.

"I don't think they know if it has to do with the MC," I tried and kept my eyes on my plate.

"Of course it does," Mom snarled. "Like I said, it's always the women paying the price for what men do." As I'd noticed so many times before, Mom's accent got more pronounced when she was upset. "Men go off to wars, and women stay behind and try to make ends meet. They struggle, starve, watch their *children* starve, and just try to stay alive. Then the other forces come and invade them, and most men don't seem to understand that invasion for women often means invasion of the private, too—not just the country. They get raped. Some even sell themselves just to be able to feed themselves and any surviving children. Our body is often the only currency we have in those situations. Look at France!"

“France?” I asked. And as always I wondered how much of these things were based on her own experiences, and a look at Dad made me think he knew something I didn’t, because he was eyeing her with sad, understanding eyes.

“After the Second World War, French women who were accused of having collaborated with the Germans were publicly shaved and paraded through the streets. So not only had they been bombed, starved, often raped, and done humiliating things to feed their children so their men could have something to come home to after the war, but when their men did finally come home, they were publicly humiliated.”

“Milaya...” Dad said and reached over the table.

“I’m sorry,” Mom said and shook her head. “I’m not saying it’s the woman’s fault, or that she should’ve done anything differently.”

“I know.” I didn’t want to argue, and I didn’t want to talk about it. “I know that’s not what you meant.”

Unfortunately, it got even worse when Dad changed to a different topic of conversation. It was meant as an attempt to lighten the mood, but it managed to make me even more uneasy.

“Anna, love, where did you go this morning?” he asked with a smile.

“I went to give a friend a gift,” I answered and avoided looking at Irina, who probably had a really good idea of who the friend was. “Papa, hand me the vegetables, please.”

“Did your *friend* give you that necklace?” Mom’s voice was very teasing, and she seemed to have calmed down and was smiling. “It’s very beautiful.”

“Yes it is, and yes it was a gift.”

“So, will we meet this friend of yours?” Dad continued relentlessly and winked. “I must say I’m glad you have a *friend*.”

“Please drop it, Papa.”

If he didn't, I'd have to tell him it was one of the 'Baxter boys,' which would quite possibly kill Mom after what she'd just said. Also, the 'Baxter boys' had come up more than once when I was a kid. They liked Lisa, though, but mainly since we didn't hang out much outside of school, and they'd been in Spain by the time I'd started occasionally going to the clubhouse with her.

The rest of the dinner was mostly weird. Mom and Dad were once again trying to avoid talking about ballet, and since Mom, Dad, and Irina's entire lives revolved around ballet, it didn't leave much for us to talk about. Added to that the reality that my entire life was work and having sex with Mitch... it was the most silent Christmas dinner we'd ever had.

I helped Irina to clean up the kitchen while Mom and Dad set up the living room for desert.

"They're trying, Zvezda."

"I know. It's just... I know it's hard for them, too, but it feels like... I don't know."

Irina put her arms around me and hugged me.

"It feels like they don't think you're their daughter anymore."

I couldn't help it; the next second I felt my eyes water.

"Yes," I admitted with a snivel, hoping that I hadn't smeared snot on the shoulder of her dress.

"Honey," Irina said while still holding me close, "do you think it is them feeling that, or you feeling it?"

Sometimes I hated how well she knew me. Even before Mom and Dad left, it was Irina who knew my every mood change and what had caused it. She always said it was because we were the same, and I knew I was the child she'd never had. Her parents, my grandparents, had waited until after their career was over before they had children, just like a lot of ballet dancers did. Which meant that by the time the child was born they had their post-ballet career figured out. Since I wasn't a planned child, and both my parents and Irina had still been working as dancers, they'd split the work of bringing me

up between them. They'd basically tried to make their busy schedules work in a way that let one of them always be at home with me. It rarely worked, since ballet dancers spent a lot of time at the ballet just waiting, but I'd often gone with them. In a way, I'd grown up at the Phoenix ballet.

My earliest memories were of its halls and training rooms—I lived and breathed ballet before I could even walk. I don't remember my parents or Irina ever saying that I was going to be a dancer; to me that was just the way it was going to be. When I got older, I often went from my own practice to watch the rehearsals there, dreaming of when I would be just like them.

So I knew Irina was right; it didn't feel like I was their daughter, because I didn't feel like myself.

"It's me feeling it."

"Zvezda," she held my cheeks and made me look at her, "they're only worried because they don't want to hurt your feelings. They're worried that them talking about dancing is just going to remind you that you can't do that anymore. Give them time. More importantly, give yourself time to find your own identity and who you are. You're still in the middle of becoming whoever you were meant to be."

I nodded and dried my cheeks. She was right, again, I was still finding my way, finding out who I was without ballet in my life.

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"Serdtse," Dad mumbled. I was sitting next to him in the couch, and he had his arm around me. Mom was on my other side. "Whatever you choose to do, it'll be fine. I know this, because you're a strong and determined woman."

It was two days after Christmas day, and the dreaded talk had finally come. The 'we still love you' talk. I knew that the next step was to get me to go and see a ballet, which wasn't going to happen, not for a really long time. I was in no way ready for that.

“Thank you, Papa.” I sat up straight and gave him a shaky smile. There was, however, something else I was ready for. “I’m thinking about going up to New York for a few days to visit some friends.”

“That’s a good idea,” Mom said. “Do you still have some of your things there?”

“No,” I shook my head. “They took care of it.”

The two dancers I had shared my apartment with, Satomi and Jens, had sent me all my things. They’d understood why it was hard for me to come, and since they’d only sent my personal belongings, they’d made it very clear that I was welcome to visit so we could go through the things we’d bought together for the apartment. At the moment, I didn’t need any of it, since I’d moved in with Irina, but I still wanted to see the two of them. I missed them. I talked to them now and then, but in a way I think it was as hard for them as it was for me. I was a reminder of what could happen.

“Maybe you could visit the ballet as well?” Dad avoided looking at me when he dropped it in like it was just a minor suggestion.

“No, Papa, I’m not ready for that.”

“You are going to have to do it sooner or later.”

“Why?” I was getting angry. “Why would I have to do that? I see no reason to subject myself to that. At all!”

“Honey,” Mom tried. “There are steps in this type of grieving and to get over—”

“Have you been checking this online?” I interrupted her. “Mama... please...”

“Maybe you should try seeing a therapist?” And this was Dad trying to be reasonable. “You didn’t really give that a try.”

“Dad, I don’t... Can you just let me do this my way?”

“What way is that?” And now Irina was ganging up on me as well. “Because, honey, I know you’re strong, I know you’re handling this extremely well—you’re amazing—but at the

same time I think it might be a good idea to see someone who can help you even further.”

I stood up and hobbled into my room. It wasn't like I hadn't thought about it. I was just...

I'd tried a psychiatrist. They'd more or less forced me at the hospital, and after a forty-five minute session, I'd decided it was not for me, and I'd refused to see him again.

Brett had suggested it, too—once. He'd said that it wasn't just the body that needed to recover, and I'd made sure he never suggested it again.

I couldn't even give a proper explanation to why I hated the idea. It just felt like it would mess everything up. Somehow it felt like I'd folded all those bad things neatly into suitcases, closed them, and locked them away. Starting to poke around in those cases would mean throwing them open and airing all those thoughts. The ones I preferred to not admit that I'd had. Because if I did... would I feel them all again?

I sat down in my armchair, picked up my phone, and texted Mitch. Not five minutes later, he answered that he'd be home in thirty minutes. I went out to tell them I would be away for the night.

“Why?” Dad asked as he stood up.

“I'll be back in the morning. Please, I just need to.”

“Serditse, I'm sorry if we hurt your feelings.”

“Papa, it's not that,” I tried, and he looked at me with lifted eyebrows. “Okay, maybe it's a little about that, but I really just need a break. I'll be back in the morning and we'll talk again, okay?”

“Okay,” he said and walked up to me, took me in his arms. “I love you, Anna.”

I hugged Mom and Irina as well and then left. When I arrived at Mitch's, he wasn't home yet, so I sat down, leaning against his door while waiting for him. He arrived fifteen minutes later, and when he saw me he smiled.

“Can you get up from there without help, Gimp?”

“Yes,” I said and glared at him. “But I’d prefer help.”

“Really?” he said and moved to stand right in front of me. “Because it’s hard, or is it just that you like me carrying you around?”

“A little of both?”

He laughed, put his hands under my arms and lifted me up. While he held me against the door, he gave me a long, slow kiss. I wrapped my arms around his neck and my legs around his waist.

“So...” he mumbled. “What did you tell your parents?”

“Can we not talk about them?”

He studied me for a few seconds and then nodded. “Okay.” He leaned his forehead against mine, and I closed my eyes. “Wanna get stoned, fuck, and forget about this day for now?”

“Yes,” I said and nodded with my eyes still closed. “Think you can help me with that?”

He stroked my nose with his and gave my lips a short kiss. “Absolutely. That’s what fuck buddies are for.”

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I was resting on his shoulder, and I was finally starting to feel relaxed. His hand was stroking my hair, and he had a cigarette in the other. After putting it out, he turned towards me and put both his arms around me.

“Wanna talk about it?”

“I don’t know,” I murmured, buried my face in his chest, and hugged him tight. Then I just did. “They want me to see a shrink, see a ballet, and... other things I’m not sure I want to do.”

“So what do you want to do?”

That was probably the crux of the problem. I had no idea what I wanted to do. I’d had a plan my entire life, and I didn’t anymore. It was confusing to not have the slightest idea of what I wanted—to no longer having any real, measurable goals.

“Would it be okay if I didn’t know?” I finally said. “I mean, I used to know what I wanted to do, but now... I think I just want to figure out what I am if I’m not a dancer.”

“Might not be the right guy to tell you, since I didn’t know you when you were a dancer,” he chuckled, “but I’d say there’s a lot more to you than dancing.”

“Yeah?” I looked up, and when he felt that, he smiled at me and gave my nose a kiss.

“Yeah.” He smiled. “My mom has this thing she keeps saying, swim or sink. You either fight or give up. I’m not saying you’re about to give up, but sometimes you just gotta keep going and trust that shit will sort itself out.”

“Isn’t it ‘sink or swim’?” I asked.

“Not to Mom—always the positive first, to make it the easier to choose. Think you need that, too.”

“Thank you. For... that and for today. I think this is what I needed. This and not being around people who seem uncomfortable whenever I’m near.” I closed my eyes and relaxed even more. “What else is on your list of things I might not have done?”

“Ever fired a gun?”

“Guns scare me.”

“Need to fix that. Ever been a babysitter?”

“No.” I hadn’t had a lot of kids around me, and babysitting wasn’t something I’d done to earn money. “You mean Joshua?”

“Yeah. Promised Mac I’d give him and Vi some time to themselves. We’re gonna have a kid and godfather day.” He yawned. “He’s a month old tomorrow.”

I found it kind of sweet how he added the last part, that he was keeping track. I wasn’t used to kids at all, but Mitch had talked about how calm Joshua was. Besides, he’d be the responsible one, so it wouldn’t be that much work to go there with him.

“Okay. I’ll babysit with you.”

“You staying the night?”

“Yes.”

I felt him kiss my hair and give me a squeeze, but he didn’t say anything, and he fell asleep soon after.

I still didn’t feel sleepy. Instead I let my mind wander. Maybe it was as simple as him not knowing me as a dancer, like he’d said. That to him I was just... whoever I was now, and that was enough. Which was why I was relaxed and comfortable around him. The way he kept calling me ‘Gimp’ just to tease me felt like something that should upset me, but it didn’t. Quite the opposite. Strangely it felt like the leg wasn’t a big thing for him instead, and that made it easier for me to breathe when I didn’t have to try to be something I couldn’t be anymore.

I felt like enough when I was around him.

-o0o-

I woke up with Mitch tugging my hair, like he so often did, and that was another thing I was growing quite fond of.

“Wake up, baby. We’re gonna go to the shooting range.”

“Guns scare me,” I said as I tried to rub the sleep out of my eyes. “I told you that.”

“And I told you we need to fix that.”

“I’m a pacifist,” I tried instead. “Very non-violent and against guns.”

“It’s very sexy with chicks shooting.”

“Can’t I just be naked to get you going?”

That made him laugh. “How about this? I take you there, you try, and if it still freaks you out we’ll leave, but at least you can cross it off your list.”

“I never had that on my list.” I sat up and stretched carefully to see how good or bad it was. Mitch sat down on the bed and started kneading my muscles. “Can’t we have, like, normal things on the list? Like riding a horse, petting a tiger,

skinny-dipping—” The second the last thing slipped out of my mouth, my eyes flew open and I stared at him. His smile became so wide.

“You’ve never gone skinny-dipping?”

“Shit!”

He leaned over and gave me a kiss. “We’re definitely gonna do that, but today you’re gonna give shooting a chance.”

“I need breakfast.”

“I know. Do your thing while I make breakfast.”

“Okay.”

“Wanna do it here or in the kitchen?” he asked when he let go of my leg.

“Kitchen.”

I took my panties and a t-shirt lying on the floor. After he’d picked up my cane, he turned around, and I got up on his back.

“You like this, don’t you?” I asked him.

“Yup.” I felt his hand slip into my panties. “Especially when you’re half naked.”

Once we got downstairs, he put me on the counter and started making breakfast for me while we were talking, and I was doing ‘my stuff’ as he’d called it. The breakfast and I were done at the same time, and he helped me to the table.

While we were eating, he told me about Dawg and Edie. I’d met her both times at the clubhouse, and she was really sweet—I liked her. I had, however, somehow missed that she was Mel’s sister. Mitch told me she’d spent years traveling around the world before coming back, had fallen in love with Dawg, and had stayed here since.

“I was crushing like crazy on her,” he admitted with a small laugh. “So was Mac. We’d heard about her, and I thought she was so awesome even before we’d met her, and then we did and she was so hot. Still think she’s pretty fucking awesome.”

“She’s still pretty hot.”

“Sure, but she’s Dawg’s old lady. You don’t mess with a brother’s old lady. Ever!”

“They have two kids?”

“Yeah. Travis and Jacob.”

“And your brother and Violet have a boy. Is it all the testosterone that makes you guys only have boys?”

“Maybe,” he laughed.

I tried to get out of the shooting once breakfast was done and cleared away, but he got me down to his truck, inside it, and drove towards the shooting range. When we got there he handed me a small gun.

“There are four things you need to keep in mind. First: *Always* assume that the gun is loaded. Second: *Never* point your gun at something you don’t want to kill.”

I took a deep breath. “Pacifist, I don’t ever want to kill *anyone*, so can we please skip this?”

He looked at me and bit down on his lower lip, pulled me towards him and gave me a deep kiss. He kept his arms around me.

“Okay.” He took my hand and started to walk towards the truck again. “Still think you’d like it.”

“You’re just trying to lure me into it.”

He turned around and studied me, and I immediately knew that sneaky expression. He’d figured something out. He took a step towards me with a smile on his lips.

“Tell you what, you try this, and I’ll go with you to watch a ballet when you feel ready for it.”

I stared at him, trying to figure out if having him with me would make it better or worse. I tried to imagine it. For some reason it did make it easier to picture myself watching a ballet with him next to me—the guy who’d never known me as a dancer.

“So what’s the third rule?”

“Always keep your finger off the trigger until you’re ready to fire. And the fourth is always know what’s behind your target.” He started to walk back to the targets. He nodded to the guy who obviously owned the place, picked up the ear protectors and some sort of orange glasses, and handed them to me. “You’ll need those. I’ll stand behind you. You’ll be fine, but be ready for the recoil.”

He had one hand on my hip, and the other gently supported my left hand. Resting in my left hand was my right, and in that one, I was holding a damn gun.

He moved my ear cup to the side. “Need to relax, baby.”

“How? I’m holding a *gun*.”

He took the gun and put it on the table in front of us before he kissed the side of my neck, up to my ear, and down to my collarbone. Then his hand went down into my jeans.

“That’s not helping,” I mumbled.

Instead of answering, he spun me around and kissed me. I had no idea how what he was doing was supposed to make me relax, but I wasn’t going to fight it as long as it meant I didn’t have to deal with the gun. I felt a very distinct bulge pressing against me, and I smiled, which made him stop and look at me.

“You’re very cute in those glasses, Gimp.” He picked up the gun, checked something, and took my hand. “Come on, we’ll do this some other time.”

“Are you still going to come with me to the ballet?” I asked as I took off the glasses and put them on the table next to us.

“Have a feeling I’ll get you to fire a gun before that happens,” he said, and he looked... sad? “But I’ll go with you whenever you wanna go.”

I took a deep breath, and I realized something. Sometimes you had to just face your fears, just do things that might terrify you without thinking too much about them. This wasn’t a

ballet, it wasn't even something I had ever considered doing, but it was a start.

“Swim or sink, was it?” I asked, and he chuckled. “Okay. I'll try.”

He nodded, no gloating, no questioning or anything like that. Just nodded, gave me the glasses and turned us towards the targets. He was standing behind me again, and I tried to focus on him and his supportive hands on me.

“Tune everything out, focus on the target, and then *squeeze* the trigger. And be ready for the recoil.”

I closed my eyes, took a few deep breaths, opened them, and focused on the target.

Then I squeezed the trigger.

-o0o-

I spent New Year's Eve with my parents, Irina, and her boyfriend, Maurice. I'd met him briefly a few times, but this was the first time I'd spent some time with him. I was glad he was with us because he made the conversations flow much more easily. Dad seemed to like him as well, and Irina obviously adored him. We went out to the town square at midnight, like most of the Greenville citizens, to watch the fireworks. We also did our traditional New Year's Wishes. As I wrote the words down on the paper, I took a deep breath. 'I want to find myself.' At midnight we set the pieces of paper on fire and soaked the remnants in champagne before toasting, yelling 'S Novim Godom,' and drank it.

I noticed Lisa and Violet on the other side of the square and handed my glass to Mom.

“Mama, I'm going to say hi to some friends.”

“Do that. We'll see you at home.”

“I might be away for the night, but I'll see you tomorrow.”

“Have fun, love.”

“S Novim Godom and good night,” Dad said and waved at me.

I walked through the crowd and for a second I lost sight of her, but she waved at me to get my attention again.

“See you’re still doing that burning and soaking stuff,” Lisa greeted me with a hug. “Happy New Year!”

“Happy New Year!”

“Yeah, what was that burning thing?” Vi asked.

“It’s a Russian tradition. We write our wish for the next year on the paper.”

“Oh,” she nodded. “Kind of like the idea of that. What else do you do?”

“We eat. *A lot.*”

I felt two hands grabbing my hips, and then Mitch whispered in my ear, “So how do you say ‘Happy New Year’ in Russian?”

“S Novim Godom,” I said and turned around. He was wearing his cut and had put a lot of time into fixing his hair—he looked really good. “Drunk?”

“Planned on getting even more drunk,” he smiled and grabbed the collar of my coat to get me closer. “Any chance I can convince you to come with us back to the clubhouse?”

“Sure.”

That was what I had hoped for when I had told Mom and Dad that I might be away for the night. He put his arm around me, and we all started to walk towards the clubhouse. Since I was a bit slower than the rest of them, the two of us ended up behind the others.

“Are you naked under that coat?”

“No,” I laughed. “Sorry.”

“Think you can come to my place wearing nothing but that coat some time?”

“I’ll consider it,” I said with a serious nod. “Would at least be something I haven’t done before, walking around in just a coat. Like some perv.”

“I know there’s a little perv inside you just waiting to come out of the closet.”

I looked up, and the others were pretty far ahead, so I took his hand and pulled him into an alley.

“What?” he asked.

“I have nothing but thigh-highs and panties on under this dress.”

He stared at me for a few seconds, then picked me up and walked further into the dark alley while kissing me. Unfortunately it was a full-length dress, so he had some problems getting it out of the way and my panties off.

“Fuck!” he grumbled. “How long is this fucking dress?”

“Long.”

“Like trying to unwrap a gift with too much damn paper.”

“Well, in Russia people give gifts after midnight on New Year’s Eve.”

He laughed, got a condom from his jeans pocket, and unbuttoned his jeans. “I’m gonna freeze my ass off.”

“We could just go to the clubhouse,” I teased and tried to get out of his grip.

“No fucking way,” he countered, and grabbed my ass to lift me up again. “I want my gift. Move the dress out of the way.”

I did, and then reached down to steer him right. We groaned in unison when he slipped inside.

“See,” he mumbled and kissed me. “There’s a little perv in you.”

“A gimp perv,” I moaned as he began to thrust with relentless speed. It made him laugh, and I leaned my head on his shoulder.

“Lips, baby,” he said a few moments later without missing a beat. “Give me some lips.”

I came not long after while sucking on his tongue, and I felt him harden inside of me. With a long groan, muffled by

my lips, he came. It had been quick, a real quickie in an alley in central Greenville. I'd honestly never done anything like it, and when he gently put me back on the ground I laughed. He picked up my cane and handed it to me while laughing and shaking his head.

“You are one crazy chick.”

“Didn't hear you protesting.”

“No fucking way,” he shook his head again and buttoned up his jeans. “And the rest of the night, I'm gonna keep in mind that you're not wearing any panties.”

I looked at my panties lying in the dirt on the ground.

“Yeah, I'm not putting those back on.”

When we got to the clubhouse, Brick came and met us by the door while Mitch helped me take off my coat.

“Hey, darlin',” he said with a smile and gave my cheek a kiss. “Good to see you again. I take it you had a nice walk here?”

I wasn't sure what to say, and quickly decided to ignore the last part of his greeting. “Good to see you, too, Mr. Baxter.”

He stared at me for a few seconds, then he laughed. He had a great, burly laugh that came from deep down in his chest. It was the kind of laugh that forced a smile out of you no matter how uncomfortable you felt.

“Mr. Baxter? I like her,” he said to Mitch. “Gotta say, darlin', you're classin' up the place with your dress. Think that's the fanciest dress ever seen the inside of this clubhouse.”

I looked down at my black dress and kept smiling. It seemed very unlikely that it was meant as an insult, or even a complaint. “I'm going to choose to take that as a compliment,” I finally said.

“Smart girl.” Brick turned his attention to Mitch. “I *really* like her. Why haven't you brought her around for a family dinner yet?”

Before Mitch had time to answer, Brick took off, and he was laughing again.

“So...” I started and cleared my throat. “That nickname wouldn’t come from ‘as subtle as a brick?’”

“Yeah.” Mitch looked extremely uncomfortable.

“You know what, I’ll just go see if I can find Lisa or Violet.”

“Do that. I’ll find you later.”

It didn’t take me long to find Violet. She was very easy to spot with her bright violet hair.

“Hi,” I said when I sat down next to her. “There’s a lot of people here.”

“I know. Hence me sitting in the corner,” she smiled.

“Where’s Joshua?”

“Mel and April are the designated babysitters, so all the kids have been dropped off there.”

“April?”

“My dad’s... girlfriend, I guess you’d call it.” She laughed a little. “Just sounds a bit odd. Especially when I talk about my husband and my dad’s girlfriend.”

“That... does sound a bit odd. Yes.”

We didn’t get to talk long before Sisco sat down with us, and he immediately started flirting with me. Not in a creepy way, though. Considering how he now and then glanced in Mitch’s direction, I assumed it was more to wind him up than actually trying to win me over.

“Shouldn’t you be getting head in a corner somewhere?” Violet asked him, and I almost choked on my beer.

“Who are you and what the fuck happened to the blushing girl you used to be?” Sisco said to Violet with a laugh. “And I already had one.”

“You’re making Anna blush,” she pointed out, but I shook my head.

“It was more you making me blush, to be honest.”

“See? A woman wearing a dress like that is a classy woman, so you don’t talk about head or anal sex around them,” he said. I didn’t just blush at that, I laughed out loud, too.

“Jesus!” I exclaimed. “Let me know if you plan on doing that out here, so I can leave first.”

“I will,” Sisco smiled. “How’s the sturdy fella?” he asked Violet.

“He’s good,” she answered. “Sturdy and calm.”

When Lisa came walking towards us, Sisco stood up and gave me a wink before turning to Violet again.

“Let me know when you’ve got an opening for that ink we talked about.”

“Sisco,” Lisa beamed. “Just the man I was looking for.”

“Gotta go, doc,” he said. “Catch you later, Swan,” he continued with a wink at me before taking off.

“Okay,” Lisa said, and she looked slightly deflated.

“Uh,” I started once he was gone. “Am I missing something?”

“He’s a stubborn ass, and I’m done,” she muttered.

I looked at the big, longhaired biker who was tearing through the clubhouse as if hunted by demons. I tried to figure out how old he was, but it wasn’t easy with any of these guys. I guessed he was at least fifteen years older than Lisa, probably twenty.

“Really?” I said and stared at Lisa.

“It’s a long story, and I’m not going to think about it. Let’s get drunk.” She turned to Violet. “And that includes you!”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

What Did You Do?

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Mitch had Joshua on his arm when he went to open the door. Anna was on the other side, and she gave him a nervous smile.

“I hope this isn’t because you think I’ll be of any kind of help,” she said with a worried expression as she walked inside. “Because I really don’t know anything about babies.”

“No. It’s about crossing it off the list,” he answered. “Besides, they’ll be home soon. Don’t think Vi can be away from him for more than a few hours.”

Mitch hadn’t seen Anna since the morning after New Year’s Eve, five days earlier, since her parents hadn’t left until earlier that day.

The visit before that, when she’d needed to get away from her family, had been a surprise, and he’d figured some shooting might calm her down. It always calmed him down. When she’d totally freaked out, he’d decided that pushing her into doing something was probably just stupid, but she’d done it, and towards the end she’d seemed to at least be okay with it. She was pretty shit, though, but he hadn’t told her that.

The expression she was sporting at the moment was very much the same as the one at the shooting range, but instead of a gun she was staring at Joshua, and Mitch contained his laugh.

“He’s a baby. He sleeps, screams, shits, and eats. Nothing to be afraid of.”

“It’s the two in the middle that I find scary.”

“You’re already intimidating a full-grown woman, Cue Ball. You’re gonna be an awesome guy,” he said and looked at Joshua. “Although, she’s a gimp, so I’m not sure it counts.”

Anna jabbed him on the arm and laughed. She was wearing jeans and a t-shirt, and even if she'd looked great in her New Year's Eve dress, this was how he liked her the best. Apart from naked, of course... Or wet in the shower, and now he had a boner. Which was a bit weird when he was holding a baby, so he quickly stopped thinking about her naked.

Anna was back to staring at Joshua with a terrified expression. Mitch pointed at the couch.

“Sit down so you can hold him. I need to fix him a bottle.”

“You're leaving me with him?” she asked with wide eyes. “I don't think that's a good idea.”

“I'll be in the kitchen. You'll be fine.”

She sat down, and he put Joshua in her arms. On his way to the kitchen, Mitch turned around to look at her. She still looked pretty freaked out, but it looked as if she was starting to relax. He smiled at her, but she was completely lost in Joshua, which was pretty sweet, so he continued to get the bottle Vi had left in the fridge.

He'd tried to be an adult about it when she'd talked about breast milk, but he'd finally cracked up and started laughing. She'd called him ‘the most immature almost thirty-year-old man on the planet,’ to which he'd objected—he was not ‘almost thirty.’ When he'd asked her how she got the milk out of her boobs, Mac had cracked up, too, and Vi had just shaken her head and told Joshua that both his dad and uncle were immature idiots.

When he came back out to the living room, Anna was talking to Joshua in Russian. He still found Russian so extremely hot; he fucking loved it when she mumbled things in his ear while he was fucking her. She looked up at him and smiled. The smile died when he handed her the bottle, though.

“I'm not sure how to do that.”

“Put it in his mouth, he'll figure out the rest.”

He watched Anna feed Joshua, still talking to him in Russian.

“What are you saying?” he finally had to ask.

“I’m telling him the story about the fiddle-playing soldier.”

“The one you and Irina talked about?”

“Yes.”

“Can’t you do that in English, so I can hear it, too?”

“No. It works better in Russian.” She gave him the empty bottle. “And now?”

Mitch took a baby blanket, threw it over his shoulder, and took Joshua from Anna.

“What’s with the blanket?”

“He’s gonna throw up.”

She watched them curiously, and when Joshua burped and, as always, threw up, she made a disgusted face.

“Seems like a waste of resources.” She leaned back. “And now?”

“Now he sleeps.”

“I have to say, this babysitting doesn’t seem like a lot of work. I think the girls in my class were highly overpaid.”

“Wait until he starts walking.”

He remembered babysitting Eliza; that had been a lot of work. She was butt-fucking crazy by the time she turned a year old. And loud! Also, like a fucking monkey, she’d climbed everywhere. He had to admit, though, she was the cutest kid he’d ever seen.

He looked down at Joshua, whose eyelids were already heavy, and he was about to fall asleep. Of all the kids Mitch had been with as babies, Joshua was by far the calmest and nicest—possibly also the chubbiest.

“Looks like I got out of the diaper change,” Anna said with a smile.

“For now.” When he looked up at her, her eyes were fixed on Joshua. “You okay with your parents leaving?”

“Yeah. We talked a lot, some of it good. They freaked a little when I told them where I’d spent the New Year’s Eve night, and with whom, but I think we were okay by the time they left.” She rolled her eyes. “The words ‘those Baxter boys’ and ‘that MC club’ were mentioned more than once, though.”

“Those Baxter boys?” he laughed.

“Yeah, you two were pretty infamous at school. At least you were.”

“Ahh, yes, I was. I was bored.”

“Bored?”

“I’m easily bored.”

She didn’t answer, just nodded, and he wondered what that was about. Then she looked back up and gave him strange smile. She leaned forward and gave him a kiss on the cheek.

“Think he’ll manage to keep you busy,” she said with a nod to Joshua.

“Yes, he will,” he agreed. “This is my little dude.”

After Mac and Vi returned home, he took Anna to his place. They had dinner, watched a movie, and she fell asleep on his couch. So he carried her up to bed, helped her get undressed, and lay down next to her—just looking at her.

He’d figured out a few things over the Christmas holiday. He was madly in love with her, and it was probably the first time since his early teens he was in love with someone. But he also knew that Anna was so lost in her own shit that if he told her now, she’d panic. She wasn’t ready for anything like that. The chick hardly knew who she was anymore, and she’d had her entire life—or at least what she thought was her entire life—smashed to pieces. The way he figured it, the only thing he could do for now was to be there for her, not push, and let her figure things out on her own.

On the plus side, she was much more relaxed these days than she’d been just two months earlier when they started this... thing. She laughed a lot more, and the fact that she came to him when she was upset said something. She was

comfortable with him, and that was enough for him because it meant she'd stick around.

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She called him two weeks later and said she'd had a shit day and that shooting might help. He started laughing, and he was pretty sure she was close to hanging up on him by the time he managed to collect himself.

“There's a party at the clubhouse later, but we can swing by the shooting range before that.” He got up and borrowed the key to his dad's truck and wave towards Mel to make sure she saw him take it. “Want me to pick you up?”

“I'm at home.”

He still hadn't figured out her schedule. Most often she worked late evenings, and she had weird days off, and then there were days like this, when she started work in the morning and was done around two. But no matter the hours she worked, they managed to see each other most days, pretty much every day, and he'd somehow turned into Mac and went home after the church on Fridays.

The thing with the Dutch Smiling Ghouls club was ticking along, and it had been decided that they were going to Amsterdam later that year to meet up with them. They were meeting the US branch first, though. There was still some bullshit about where the meet was going to happen, but Mitch assumed it would be in Englewood with the mother charter.

Hump was still gone, and nothing had happened since the murder besides sporadic and pathetic hacking attempts. They hadn't managed to find a single trace of him, and that alone was suspicious as fuck. Hump was obviously doing his best to stay under the radar. The cops had been taking it easy when it came to the murder. Apparently even cops celebrated Christmas.

“So what happened for you to have a day shitty enough to want to use a gun, Mrs. Pacifist?” he asked when she opened the door.

“Miss,” she growled and picked up her jacket and handbag. “I’m a *miss*.”

“Yeah, I know, and we’re gonna see that in a few minutes on the shooting range.” He stepped aside, and as she passed him, she hit him with the cane. “What the fuck! Did you just hit me with your cane?”

“It’s the privilege of old hags and gimps,” she said and gave him a smile. “You’re having a party on a Tuesday?”

“Dawg’s birthday,” he explained, but it didn’t escape him that she still hadn’t told him what had happened to get her pissed.

She did a little better with the shooting, but frankly not that much better. She didn’t even seem to care if she hit or missed the target, and most of the time it was like she wasn’t even bothering to aim. It didn’t matter; she was still sexy as hell. He lifted the ear protector covering her ear.

“Ever fucked in a truck?”

“I’ve had sex in a car,” she tried.

“Not the same. Ready to go?”

She put the gun on the table in front of them, turned around, and nodded with a smile.

“I haven’t seen you shoot. You mock me, but I’m not sure you’re all that much better than me at this.”

Just to show off, he didn’t let go of her when he picked up the gun, fired the remaining shots, and then winked at her.

“Turned on?” he asked.

“I’m a pacifist, you know.”

“Between the shooting and the cane bashing, you could’ve fooled me.” He leaned down and kissed her. “Come on, might not have turned you on, but I’m very ready, so I think I can get you going.”

On their way back, he turned onto a small desert road, and pacifist or not, she was very ready. When she sat down on his dick with a satisfied groan, he grabbed hold of her hips. He’d

unbuttoned her shirt earlier and tried to move a bra cup to the side with his mouth.

“Help me out here, babe,” he mumbled, still trying to see the awesome nipples he knew were hiding under her bra. “I want a taste.”

She pushed it to the side, and he knew he was grinning like an idiot. He gave her knuckles, still holding the bra, a kiss before giving her nipple a quick lick. Then he gently blew on it to see it pebble before he took it into his mouth. She groaned and pushed down on him even harder.

“Mitch,” she mumbled. “This list has transformed from ‘things I couldn’t do because I was a dancer’ to ‘things I haven’t done,’ and now I think it’s just things you want to do with me.”

He let go of her nipple and looked at her. “That a problem?”

“No,” she smiled. “Not at all. Unless it’s me stealing stuff.”

“Shoplifting, baby,” he said and groaned when she rolled her hips. “Just shoplifting.”

He wasn’t able to convince her to go to the party with him, though. She had loads of excuses, including not having a gift. So he warned her that Eliza had a birthday the next week, he wanted her to come, and that his baby sister was a crazy feminist who’d written an essay about the role of women in ballet. He left it to her to figure out what to give a girl like that for her fifteenth birthday.

She did, however, tell him that the main reason she was pissed that day was that some customers had told her she didn’t know the first thing about culture. To his amusement, she’d snapped and told them she’d been a principal dancer at the New York City Ballet and had culture coming out of her ass. He thought it was kind of funny but took care not to laugh out loud.

The weekend after, they did the full-day-in-bed thing. They stayed naked most of the day, ordered in pizza and ate it in bed, talked, and had sex. It was amazing, and she agreed that

they should do that at least once a month. If she could get something other than pizza because it was not one of the things she'd missed due to dancing, it was because she thought it was disgusting. When she suggested sushi, he protested, though. It had to be something greasy, and when she asked why, he showed her by licking all the grease off her.

She came to Eliza's birthday party and gave her a book, *Scheherazade Goes West*. He'd taken a look at the index, and the chapters had names like 'Intelligence versus Beauty,' 'Sex in the Western Harem,' and 'Size 6: The Western Women's Harem.' He'd known Eliza would love it.

At the end of January, Anna was going to New York for a long weekend to meet old friends. He thought it was a good idea and possibly a way for her to get some closure. She spent the last night before she left with him, and he realized that since Christmas they hadn't spent many nights apart.

He kissed her goodbye in the morning, and she said she'd call when she got back. He'd bitten his tongue dozens of times in the last few weeks not to tell her he was insanely in love with her, that he couldn't get enough of her, and that he wanted them to just fucking admit they weren't just fuck buddies—she was his girlfriend. But he didn't. She kissed him goodbye, he watched her get into the elevator and wave at him with a big smile, and that was it. Besides a text to let him know she'd arrived safely, he didn't hear from her again. When he called, she didn't answer or declined his calls. No answers on texts either. Dead silence. Nothing.

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It wasn't later than nine, maybe nine-thirty, and he was already piss drunk, sitting in the armchair in his dorm with a girl sitting between his legs, giving him a blowjob. It was okay, not much more than that. Definitely not even close to anything Anna had done to his dick. At the thought of her, he took another swig out of the bottle, but it was too late. He grabbed the bitch's hair, pulled her off his dick, and nodded towards the door.

“Get out.”

“But...”

“Get. Out!”

Once she was gone, he pulled up his jeans and grabbed the bottle again. It was pathetic, but he couldn't make it work with any of the other bitches, and it wasn't for lack of trying.

It had been almost four weeks since Anna had left, and he had no fucking idea what had gone wrong but figured she'd met some old boyfriend in New York, who also had culture coming out of his ass, and had decided that was much more the kind of guy she wanted than an outlaw biker. He just wished she had the fucking balls to tell him that instead of just cutting him off. He should've known better, though. Girls like her might like to go slumming, but they always hooked up with the *proper* guys. The suits.

He'd thought they'd had something going, but he'd obviously been wrong about that, too. It might just be that he was shit at relationships, really shit, and had misjudged everything. Maybe he should've just told her that he was in love with her, but he still believed it would've scared her. And if she were just slumming, admitting it would still have ended it all anyway.

He hadn't even bothered talking to Lisa and had, in fact, avoided her the best he could. He didn't want to hear about him, who ever the fuck it was Anna had met in New York, or what other possible fucking revelation she'd had that had made her cut him off completely.

Once the bottle was empty, he moved to lie on the bed instead and finally managed to fall asleep, or possibly pass out.

The next day was Mel's birthday. He usually liked the fact that a lot of people meant a lot of birthday parties, but at the moment he really just wanted to *not* meet anyone. But it was Mel, she'd been his second mother since he was around ten, and he owed her better than to bail out on her on her birthday. He dragged his ass out of bed, got dressed, and went home for a shower and some clean clothes. After a lot of painkillers and

a couple of hours of sleep in his own bed, he went to his dad and Mel's place.

Most of the people were already there. He handed Mel her gift, some fancy kitchen aid his dad had said she wanted, and gave her a kiss.

“How are you, honey?” she asked with worried eyes.

“I'll be fine, Mel, don't worry.”

He'd barely finished the sentence when someone grabbed his arm, dragged him out on the porch, and the next second Lisa was in his face.

“What did you do?”

He didn't have to ask what it was about. “Nothing. I didn't do shit.”

“Then why the fuck isn't she answering my calls?”

“I don't know, she's not answering my calls either.”

She calmed down, crossed her arms over her chest, and stared at him for a long time in dead silence. He sighed and sat down, since he still felt like crap, and his head was pounding.

“What happened?” Lisa finally asked.

“She went to New York, said she'd call me when she got back, and she hasn't. Guess she figured out I was trash and hooked up with some old boyfriend or something,” he shrugged.

“You know as well as I do that she's not some cultural snob.”

“What the fuck do we know? You knew her years ago. Going back and reconnecting with her old life... I don't know. Only thing I could think of.”

He took a deep breath and lit a smoke to try to control himself.

“When a woman shuts a man out, it's because she knows she can't refuse him if she sees him.”

“Lisa, we both know that's bullshit.”

“Not always.”

He looked at her. “I’m not doing this now. Sorry. I know she’s your friend, but this is none of your business.”

“But—”

“No. I’m not doing this.”

“Hey!” she exclaimed, and glared at him. “This isn’t just about Anna. It’s just as much about you, because I love you. You’re a fucking mess right now, and it feels like it’s my fault. And even if I haven’t seen her or talked to her, I’m pretty sure she is, too.”

Mitch wasn’t all that convinced about that, but didn’t see the point in protesting. Lisa had a way of not listening to anyone but herself. Especially when she was in this mood.

“I mean, you know where she lives!” she continued relentlessly. “Go there, make her talk to you. You deserve that.”

Maybe he did, but he wasn’t sure he wanted to hear what Anna had to say, and he didn’t think Lisa’s five-cent psychology about a woman ‘not being able to refuse him if she sees him’ was even close to right. Not in this case. When he didn’t answer, Lisa leaned over him and gave his cheek a kiss.

“I’ll let you stew a while longer. Then I’m coming back.”

He gave her a tired nod.

“It’s not your fault,” he said when she was at the door. “Just thought you should know. And I love you, too.”

“Thanks.” She smiled. “I’m here if you wanna talk.”

“I know.”

He stayed out on the porch when she went inside. In a way she was right, it would at least be some kind of closure, finding out what the hell had happened, because he honestly didn’t have a single fucking clue. Anna was just gone. It wasn’t as if they’d had a fight, said or done anything that could indicate that something was wrong. Quite the opposite,

the last month had been fucking awesome, and he was sure she'd felt the same.

The door opened again, and this time it was Eliza.

“How's my girl?” he asked with a tired smile.

“Better than you,” she answered and sat down on the deck next to his chair. “It was a great book. The one Anna gave me.”

“Good. What feminist crap did it teach you?” He was teasing her. Secretly he was really fucking proud and relieved that she knew her own value. She wouldn't let any guy control her or push her to do shit she didn't want to. “Anything I can use to lure women in?”

“It starts with a story from ‘The Arabian Nights’ called ‘The Lady with the Feather Dress’ and it explains how love can become a prison. Like a gilded cage.” She leaned her head on his thigh, and he put his hand over her golden hair. The girl who'd been the cutest child he'd ever seen was becoming a beautiful woman. “Do you know what ‘Arabian Nights’ is about?”

“Yeah, a woman trying to stay alive by telling stories. The king has a nasty habit of marrying virgins just to kill them the next morning because his previous wife was unfaithful. Then a woman stays alive by telling him stories.” He hadn't actually read much from the book, but he'd heard about it. And seen some porn based on it. “And before you say it, I know it's called ‘A Thousand and One Nights’ in other countries.”

Eliza laughed, she was smart and read a lot, and she *loved* to hit people in the head with facts. And she also loved how she never got away with it when she talked to him. He knew that feeling.

“Yes. Anyway, that book was a view of Western women from a feminist Muslim woman's perspective. It was interesting. I'd never thought about our fixation with size, age, and beauty as something of a harem, our prison.”

“Weren't harems just something rich dudes had to get laid?”

“No. It was a prison, a way to control women. Here women are controlled in other ways. Instead of physical walls that we can see, we have mental ones.”

“Honey, I love you, you know I do, but why the fuck do you think I’m the right guy to talk to about feminism? I’m sort of an ass, you know that.”

“Which makes you the perfect guy to talk to about feminism,” she said with a sly smile. “How are you doing? Really.”

“Pretty shit, to be honest. I’ll be fine, though. It’s my job to worry about you, not the other way around, Buttercup.”

“You’re not my dad, you’re my brother, which means that’s bullshit. We take care of each other, so don’t even try telling me to not worry about you.”

He sat up straight and pointed at the chair next to his, and she moved to it. He still thought she was wrong. She was his baby sister, so it wasn’t just about taking care of each other. The day she was born, he and Mac had promised their dad they’d look after her and be there for her when Brick couldn’t. Brick definitely couldn’t deal with the fact that she was becoming a woman, so Mitch figured that making sure that went as smoothly as possible was on everyone but Brick. Which didn’t make him a bad father; he was there for her in other ways, and she really was the apple of his eye.

At the same time, she’d continue worrying no matter what he said, so it was better to just fill her in on the basics.

“Things are a bit shit between me and Anna. I’ll get over it, no matter what happens, so don’t worry about it too much.”

“Okay.” Eliza hugged her legs. “You really like her, don’t you?”

“Yes.”

They all knew, for sure. They gossiped like bitches, all of them, and him walking around with her in the clubhouse, disappearing into an alley on New Year’s, and not paying any attention to sweetbutts had made it really clear to everyone that, yes, he really liked Anna.

“She’s nice,” Eliza mumbled. “Kind of disappears in a crowd, but nice. Mom and Edie like her as well.”

“What are you trying to say?” he asked and gave his baby sister a glare.

“Gather your balls and go get her.” She smiled even wider. “Sink or swim, you know.”

“It’s swim or sink, baby, but I’ll try to stay afloat,” he laughed and stood up. He pulled her out of her chair and gave her a hug. “One of these days that mouth of yours is gonna get you in trouble, Buttercup.” He kissed the top of her head. “Let me know when that happens, and I’ll gather my balls and rescue you.”

“You’ve taught me how to rescue myself, but having you guys around does help. I mean have you seen my dad? Not like anyone would dare to fuck with me.” She gave him a squeeze. “Come and celebrate Mom. I know you’re kind of an ass, but don’t make her worry on her birthday.”

He agreed. Mel didn’t deserve that, so they both went inside and he sat down at the table with Eliza next to him. He stuck around the entire day and crashed in the guest room that night.

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On the Saturday of weekend after the yearly spring Hog Roast, which he’d actually skipped for the first time ever, his doorbell rang and Mitch found Mac standing outside, holding up joints. His brother pointed towards the terrace.

“You and me, these, out there. We need to talk.”

“I guess Lisa told you,” Mitch muttered and pulled a hoodie over his head before opening the door to the terrace.

“Uh, no.” Mac stared at him. “Fucking hell, tell me you didn’t go there.”

“What?”

“Did you fuck Lisa?”

“No! Jesus! Give me some fucking credit.”

“Sorry.”

“Fucking hell.”

“Sit down,” Mac said once they were outside, and Mitch did.

He’d told Mac that Anna had gone to New York and that he hadn’t heard from her, but that was the last thing Mac knew about.

“So why are you getting me stoned?” Mitch finally asked.

“Yesterday I rode through Phoenix, and I saw Anna coming out of an abortion clinic.”

“What?” Mitch didn’t really get it.

“She was leaving an abortion clinic.”

Mitch stared at him. His brain didn’t comprehend what Mac was saying at all. Then all synapses set off at once, and his brain was doing calculations at the speed of a fucking quantum computer. If she was pregnant, it wasn’t with some New York dude, because she wouldn’t know yet, and before that... there was no one but him for years. Years. But they’d always used protection. He’d almost slipped up once, but that couldn’t be it.

Then it hit his brain like a fucking brick—shower sex. They’d had sex in the shower. Panic sex just so he could prove to himself they were just fuck buddies. But that was just once. What were the fucking odds? It couldn’t be. And would she just have an abortion without telling him? He honestly wasn’t sure.

Then it all made sense to him. Why she was staying away. Or... not perfect sense, but it made *more* sense at least.

“Fuck.” He looked at Mac. “Was she alone, or did she have a friend with her?”

He was hoping it might be that she’d been there with a friend, but he knew that was unlikely. She didn’t have many friends in Arizona.

“No. Just her,” Mac answered and shook his head. “I thought you always suited up. I was kind of hoping you’d laugh at me.”

“I slipped. We had sex in the shower, and... I... yeah.”

“Shower sex is good.”

“Not that fucking good.”

They sat in silence, and then Mac chuckled. “So the one time you get to fuck her without a condom, you didn’t even notice how fucking good it was?”

“Not helping!” He turned and looked at Mac. “Think she’d already done it?”

“I don’t know, man. She looked like she always does, and she could’ve just been there to check it out. But she wouldn’t go there if she didn’t need to.”

“Maybe she was protesting. One of those crazy sign-holders thing?” Mitch tried, and Mac’s raised eyebrow was enough of an answer. “No. She probably wouldn’t. Do women do that? Don’t they... I don’t know, *tell* a guy they’re pregnant?”

“You’re asking me?”

“Yeah. That was stupid.” Asking Mac ‘the family man’ about how fuck buddies behaved was stupid. He leaned his head in his hands. “Shit. Fuck, motherfucker, and shit.”

He was trying to imagine it, but he had no idea how he really felt. If she’d done it, shouldn’t he be relieved? It wasn’t that fucking long ago he’d told his mom he’d put a bullet in his head if he were a dad before next Thanksgiving. And now he was... what? Being sad that she’d had an abortion? Or just pissed that she didn’t tell him, or even give him a shot? He had absolutely no fucking idea what it was that he was feeling—or what he was supposed to feel.

He looked at Mac. “I’m not sure what I’m supposed to do.”

“Me neither, but I don’t think pouring tequila down your throat is the answer.”

“No. Probably not,” he agreed. “I thought she’d met someone in New York or something, and I was pissed.”

Mitch rarely gave a fuck about what other people thought about him or what he was doing, but he always cared about what Mac thought about him. He always had because Mac was one of the good guys. He could never be *like* him, but he needed Mac to be okay with what he did. Always. Mac was pretty much his moral compass, and even if he didn’t keep a constant eye on it, he liked to glance at it on occasion to know he wasn’t way off.

Mac eventually laughed. “Pouring tequila down your throat could be the temporary answer to that.”

“Yeah.”

“You’re a total goner,” Mac chuckled. “It’s not too late. Unless you can’t forgive her.”

“I don’t know. I’m not sure what I’d have said if she had talked to me, but it does feel pretty fucking shitty of her to not even care enough to tell me.” The more he thought about it, the more pissed he actually got. “Extremely fucking shitty.”

“Maybe she’s confused about it, too, Mitch.”

Oh, he bet she was. He was kind of wondering how many loops life was going to throw her in a short time. He still thought she should’ve told him, though. He caught himself wondering if he would prefer it if she’d already had the abortion, or if he actually wanted her to keep it—and he didn’t know. At the same time it pissed him off that she’d cut him out of it all together. Even if they’d never talked about what they had going on together, they’d both known it was more than sex, and they both knew he deserved better than what she was doing now.

“Hey, it’s not all messed up,” Mac said. “It’s not like she met someone else, and is about to move away or something, and she might be having your kid.”

“I’m just trying to figure out if a kid is a good or bad thing.” When Mac started to laugh he turned towards him. “What?”

“Just... you’ve gone through your entire life, without ever hitting a real bump in the road. Then you actually fall for the girl, and when it really matters, you fuck up.”

Mitch just shook his head, but he did smile a little. Mac was right, when it really mattered, he had fucked up. And he had no idea how to fix it, or if he even wanted to fix it. Or what he wanted the result to be. He wanted Anna, wanted a real shot with her, and he wasn’t sure that knocking her up was the best way to do that, whether she kept the child or not. And frankly, he wasn’t sure what he’d do if he found out she’d had an abortion, either.

“Have you ever even been dumped before?” Mac asked.

“Yeah. Victoria Hanson.”

“You were seventeen then.”

“Still. I’ve been dumped and it sucked.”

“You got head in the library the next day.”

“That’s how I grieve.”

Mac just shook his head while laughing, but he stayed for almost the full night, and they talked, but not about Anna or... the thing that might not be a thing. Mac was being Mac, and he was giving him time. He doubted he’d get away that easily the next time he brought it up. He’d figure it out.

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He didn’t figure it out, and after a few more days of drinking and drugs, he stumbled out of his room, hung over as fuck. After yelling at some hang-arounds and sweetbutts, he finally got a cup of coffee.

Two minutes later, his dad sat down next to him.

“I was gonna give you time, and I did. You’re my son, I love you, but after a month of this shit even *I* wanna put a bullet in you. Can you even imagine what the rest of them want to do?”

“Dad, this isn’t the time.”

“No, because you’ve been drinking like a fish and snorted more shit than I’d like to think about, but this is it. You’ve got two minutes to tell me what your fucking problem is, or you’re out.”

“Out?”

“We have important shit going on. The meet with the Ghouls is next fucking month, and you’ve dropped the ball. Mech is taking care of everything himself. So spill!”

“It’s Anna,” he started, but had no idea how to continue.

“Yeah, genius, I know that. I need the rest of the info.”

“She... left for New York to visit some friends, I didn’t hear from her after that, and a few days ago Mac saw her coming out of an abortion clinic.”

“What did she say?”

“I haven’t talked to her.”

“So you don’t actually know if she had an abortion, or if she was just desperate and tried to figure out what the fuck she should do?” His dad sighed and shook his head.

Mitch didn’t know how to answer, but it didn’t matter. His dad wasn’t done, and with a firm grip of his neck, he took him outside so they could talk in private.

“I don’t give a *fuck* where you put your dick, or if you’re drinking or smoking pot. But when you start with heavier drugs, and don’t seem to have any control over it, I *do* have a problem, because it means you’ll make stupid mistakes. And I don’t give a fuck about you not being able to keep it in your pants even when you have girlfriends. I really don’t. But if you knock a woman up, you take care of your kid.”

“Fuck you! I don’t even know if it’s mine! She could be screwing half the town for all I know.”

He honestly didn’t see it coming. Whether it was the fact that he was hung over as fuck, or that he didn’t think his dad was capable of it, he didn’t know, but he didn’t see it coming. His dad’s fist connected with the side of his face twice. The

next thing he saw were his own hands resting on the ground, and his ears were ringing.

Then he was pulled off the ground, and Brick's face was mere inches from his own.

“We both know that's bullshit, so for once in your fucking life, be a man about a woman and not just a fucking dick.”

“I'm sorry.”

“You can't keep this up. You know that, too. We need you, but we need you sharp. Go talk to her, sort this shit out, and come back when you've pulled your head out of your ass.”

Brick dropped him on one of the benches, and when Mitch touched his face with his hands, he felt the blood. Obviously his dad had split his eyebrow or something. With yet another sigh, Brick squatted down in front of him.

“Remember that dinner when you told me about black holes?” he asked.

“Yeah.”

When he was younger, Mitch'd eagerly shared his discoveries at the dinner table. Most of the time, it was him talking for twenty minutes straight without anyone interrupting or asking questions. This was before he fully understood the wonders of the internet, where he could share his discoveries with people who actually understood them, could comment on them, and even teach him more about them.

“I didn't get much of it, but I do remember you saying it was just a whole lotta nothin'. That's what you are now, son. A whole lotta nothin'. So get your act together and go get the girl.”

As usual, his dad had totally missed the point of what Mitch'd been trying to say when came to black holes, but he did understand what he meant.

“What if she had the abortion?”

“Did you ever say anything to her that could make her think she was more than just a fuck to you?”

“She should still have *said* something. Not just kill it off.”

“You don’t even know if she did. Find out before you’re pissed at her. And for the record, that could be my second grandkid there, so you better fucking try to patch that shit up. It’s family.”

“Ever thought that I might’ve just have been a fuck for her?”

“I know you’re a charming fucker when you try, so I’m not too worried,” Brick said with a crooked grin as he stood up. “I’ll see you in a few days. You need to come by and calm Mel down. She’s worried. And you owe Mech a big fucking apology, because he’s been covering your ass.”

Mitch watched his dad walk away and back into the clubhouse. It was the first time in years he felt like crying. He’d known his dad would be pissed, but he’d actually been more worried he’d go after Anna. Which was kind of ridiculous when he thought about it. Apparently Anna was on his good side, and instead it was somehow completely his fault, which didn’t feel fair, either.

Brick was right, though. He needed to at least talk to her before hating her guts.

Even if his dad got the idea of black holes completely wrong, Mitch was still stuck on them. A lot of physicists, even Einstein, hadn’t believed they were real. Their formulas and ideas proved they were possible, but they refused to believe nature would allow a force like that to exist. The idea of such an immense force, one that could cause the core of an enormous star to just disappear, it was beyond what a human mind could comprehend.

He could relate to that at the moment.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

It Was More

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When the doorbell rang, I was surprised, since I wasn't expecting anybody, but I went to open it. And there he was. Mitch. I hadn't seen him since the morning of the day I went to New York, but I'd certainly thought about him. I just hadn't been able to deal.

While I was in New York, I had spent most of my time with my old roommates, the lovely Japanese Satomi and the very, very hot, and also gay, Jens from Germany. They were kind of a funny couple to look at. She was small, dark, and quite shy, and he was huge, blond, and outgoing to an extreme extent. It was great to see them again, and we spent the first night catching up. They didn't avoid talking about dancing, but when it came to them everything about ballet was about gossip. Who was currently hating who, who was possibly giving blowjobs to get good parts since they totally didn't deserve the roles they were getting, who was getting fat (besides me), and all those things I had missed.

It was fun, and I had laughed so hard my belly ached. I told them about what I was doing, the work at the theater, Lisa, and they both gushed about the fact that I was having sex with a biker. They kept asking about him, and I showed them the necklace.

"Oh my god!" Jens yelled. "Your biker has given you a pink diamond!"

"It's not a diamond," I laughed.

"Darling, I'm telling you, the babushka is far too good taste for him to put something that horrible next to it unless it's a diamond."

I rolled my eyes to Satomi—trust the gay to not know what bad taste straight guys could have—and she nodded

understandingly.

“I saw that,” Jens said, still yelling, “and I’m telling you, it’s a diamond. Bet you anything.”

He made me take it off, so he could use it to make a small scratch on a mirror, claiming that was only possible if it was a diamond, but I still doubted it.

The next day, while they were working, I walked around New York, visiting my old favorite spots. Towards the afternoon I just did it, I went to the New York City Ballet. I sat outside and cried for fifteen minutes, and it took me another fifteen to calm down, and then I finally walked inside. It was like coming home, except it wasn’t my home anymore. They all welcomed me, and there were so many hugs and it was overwhelming—all of it. I spent the full afternoon there but left before the show. That would be too much. I’d also gotten used to the idea of seeing my first ballet since the accident with Mitch. I wanted that.

Both Jens and Satomi had Sunday off, so we had some wine on Saturday when they got home.

“Are you being careful?” Satomi asked when we were talking about Mitch again. “I mean, using protection and so on.”

“Yes!”

“Good. I know we weren’t always before, but you should have a normal period now, so it’s much more likely that you’d get pregnant.”

Actually that hadn’t been the main reason why I had been insisting on a condom with Mitch, it was more the small detail about him being something of a manwhore, but Satomi was right. Ballet dancers were training so hard and had a body fat so low, it wasn’t uncommon that the periods disappeared, sometimes for months at a time. That was another thing I actually missed, because having one once a month was annoying.

And that’s when it hit me.

I hadn’t had my period, not since sometime around Thanksgiving, which was over two months ago.

My shock must have shown on my face, because both Satomi and Jens lowered their glasses and stared at me.

“Oh, my!” Jens finally said. “How long?”

“Two months.”

He took the wine glass from me. “Just in case.”

I nodded, and the three of us stared at each other. I couldn’t believe it! Sure, he’d half forgotten it once, but even though I knew there were sometimes early swimmers, it didn’t seem possible. We’d even skipped sex in the shower, since—

Except that one time, just after the picnic. I had completely forgotten about it. I hadn’t even thought about us not using protection that time.

Until now.

“Think she remembers it now,” Satomi said to Jens with a nod.

“Once!” I basically howled. “We forgot once! It’s not fair!”

“Maybe it’s nothing,” Jens tried, and then he sighed. “I’ll go to the all-night pharmacy down the street.”

So, he did, and he came back with five different types of test and until Sunday night, when I went home, I did them all. All five. And all five said the same thing.

I was pregnant.

Once again I had made a split second mistake. Okay, it was a bit longer than a split second, but it wasn’t that damn long. But still, *once*. We had been so careful and we had made *one* mistake, and I was possibly going to pay for it for the rest of my life. And *fine* it wasn’t the same as not ever being able to dance again, babies were... cute and so on, but I’d never pictured myself with children. And whatever shot Mitch and I had to get to know each other, me getting over other things and just...

I hadn’t allowed myself to really think about it fully, but the last month—or even two months—had been different between us. It had been good, and I had started to realize that

no matter what Lisa had said, he wasn't just being charming. He liked me. I was still trying to find my footing in my new life, and I think he was understood that, and he was giving me time while still being there. Not even mentioning I was starting to feel good about myself, at least when I was around him.

He might like kids, but liking them and having one of your own were two very different things. And getting pregnant after only three months of seeing each other was not a good way of getting closer to each other, either, so whatever chance we'd had, it was gone.

I also knew that there was no way in hell I'd be able to raise a kid by myself. If for no other reason than how this would send me into another spin. I knew nothing about babies. Kids had always been something I *might* do when my career was over, but never with a guy I had been casually fucking for a month and then had carefully tried something else with for another two months or so. And not once had I entertained the idea of having a child with an outlaw biker. Because I knew that was what he was; what they did was not all legal, I knew that without a doubt. Until now, I had managed to tell myself it didn't matter, but bringing a kid into that life...

Either way, I couldn't do this by myself, so I needed him. The way I saw it, there were two options. Either me being pregnant would send him running, which was the most likely, or he'd like it and want to be a part of it. If it was the latter, him being a part of it meant we needed to stay friends. If we tried a relationship, he'd be bored in a matter of months, start cheating, and we'd fight and it would all go down in spectacular flames. I needed him as a friend because I needed the two of us to work out. If he stuck around at all, that was. I was pretty sure telling him would end our sort-of relationship anyway.

I was in a state of panic the entire flight to Phoenix, and I still had a hard time breathing by the time I got home. Luckily Irina thought I was just tired after the weekend, and she left me alone. The panic didn't leave me even once for the first week; I barely spoke to anyone and completely ignored my

phone. By the end of the week, Irina demanded to know what was going on, and I told her while bawling. That was the first time I had cried about it, but since then I'd done that with disturbing frequency. As always she tried to see the bright side, and I loved her for it; it just didn't work.

I had gone to an abortion clinic just to find out what my options were. It wasn't scary, besides the people outside who screamed at me, but I just couldn't. I was very pro-choice, but it was something else to make that choice. I didn't blame those who did it, but I couldn't. The people there were so nice, and said that there was time, and if I wasn't sure I shouldn't do it. So I went back home again.

I knew I had to tell Mitch about it sooner or later. I just had no idea whatsoever how to tell him, since I hadn't been able to sort it out in my own head. I was scared, absolutely terrified, and his reaction was actually the least of my fears.

And now he was standing in my hallway, and he knew. I had no idea how he knew, but I didn't even have to ask. He knew, and he did not look happy about it.

"Something you wanna tell me?" he eventually said.

"I was... going to. I just..."

"Before or after the abortion?"

"I'm not... How did you know? What the hell! Are you spying on me?"

"No! Mac saw you coming out of an abortion clinic in Phoenix. So you're not having an abortion?"

"No," I answered, and he looked about the same as I felt when I said it. Like he was trying to figure out if it was a good or a bad thing. "And I was going to tell you. I honestly just didn't know how. I can't even figure this out in my own head, but I want us to be friends, and I think I'd like it if you were a part of the baby's life."

"Friends?"

"I know I should've told you immediately. I probably messed this up royally, and I want us to work this out, but I

can't... Mitch, I can't deal with all of it and this pregnancy really threw me off. I can't lose you, and at the same time I can't make another big commitment, and I understand what that means." It meant that he was going to fuck other girls, possibly find someone he'd fall in love with and... all those things I'd started to hope would happen between us. "But at the moment, I need you as a friend, as someone who I know is going to be there to help me with this baby. I'm not single mom material."

"Okay," he mumbled. "I don't think I'm mentally capable of... saying much at the moment."

"Let's go to the kitchen. Irina is at her boyfriend's. She won't be back until tomorrow morning, so we have time to talk."

He nodded and followed me inside. I was still waiting for him to panic more than he already had. All I really wanted him to know was that having him in the baby's life wasn't something I was against in any way. I wouldn't deny him that. I didn't think for a second I would get away with doing it, I'd have an MC on my doorstep if I tried to keep a baby from them, but I didn't want to. He was better than me with kids. In fact, the entire MC seemed like a family.

I gave him a beer and sat down opposite him.

"I'm sorry," I finally said.

He shook his head. "It's not just your fault."

"I mean for not telling you—for panicking about it."

"Okay."

"How do you wanna do this?" I asked. "I mean do you *want* to be involved?"

"Yes," he said, but he wasn't looking at me. "I might need some time to get used to the thought, but I do."

"What happened to your face?" I'd noticed it when he'd walked in, a cut in his eyebrow, and it looked as if was developing quite a black eye.

"My dad knocked me around a little."

“What? Why?”

“Because of you.” He smiled. “He thought I was being dick.”

“I didn’t tell you I was pregnant, I stayed away for over a month, and that made you a dick?” I didn’t get it at all. “And he *hit* you?”

“Long story, and I kinda deserved it.”

“Is he going to hit me when I meet him next time?”

Mac laughed dryly. “No. He doesn’t hit women. Besides, he likes grandkids, and you’re giving him one.”

“So, is this you wanting to be involved, or are you just saying it so your dad won’t beat you up again?”

“No,” he said and shook his head, and this time he met my eyes. “I wanna be involved.”

“Do you think we can do this—as friends?”

“I don’t know, Anna, but we’ll figure it out. I guess. Not like we have a choice.”

“No.” I looked down at the table and my hands resting on it. After a deep breath I looked at him again.

“So how’s it doing?” he asked. “The sprout.”

“Sprout?” I asked with a smile. “It’s doing fine, so far. I have an appointment tomorrow.”

“Send me the bills. I’ll take care of them.”

“I like ‘Sprout.’ It’s a nice nickname for it.”

“Joshua was the Squid. Thought it was best to pick a new one for,” he cleared his throat, “this one.”

He drew his hand through his hair, and then emptied the beer bottle.

“Do you want to come with me to the appointments? I’ve been to one, and they say I’m about fifteen weeks along.”

“We could probably give them an exact date of conception,” he mumbled.

“I know.” I sighed. “The shower.”

“Sorry,” he smiled. “Just saying that we could. I didn’t mean to be an ass about it.”

I nodded. “I’m doing an ultrasound next month.”

“Yeah. I’ll go with you to that one.” He sighed and shook his head. “I’m sorry. This is a bit much right now, but I’ll come around eventually.”

“It’s okay. I’ve had time to get over it. Maybe you should take some time for it, too? I’m guessing that knocking up your fuck buddy wasn’t in your plans.”

“We weren’t fuck buddies. I’m fine with this friends idea, but don’t... It was more.”

I tried to swallow my tears. I knew that, but I didn’t want to think about that at the moment, and I definitely didn’t want to think about how much it hurt that he’d said that the friends idea was something he was fine with. It had been my goddamn suggestion, but it still hurt. We’d messed up, and it might never... But I still nodded in agreement. He deserved that—and more.

“I think we both need time to adjust, and we’ll see what happens. Okay?”

“Okay.” And he finally smiled more honestly. “I need to get going, but I’ll call. Just fucking make sure you pick up.”

“I will.”

“And call Lisa,” he said as he got up. “She’s about to rip my balls off.”

“Oh. Sorry.”

I hadn’t really thought about it, since I’d sort of avoided everyone for the past weeks. Seeing Lisa while trying to hide that I was freaking out and pregnant hadn’t seemed like a good idea. Especially since she’d know it was Mitch’s baby.

He leaned over and kissed my cheek. “We’ll work it out. Promise. I’m just gonna go get hammered for tonight.”

“I don’t blame you,” I laughed. “I wish I could go and get hammered.”

“No drinking!”

“Promise.”

I followed him to the door, and he took a long look at me.

“Ice cream is okay.”

“Good to know.”

I took a deep breath once he was gone. All in all, it hadn’t been as bad as it could’ve been.

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I called Lisa the next morning, and we agreed to meet up later. She’d been pretty pissed, but said she just wanted to meet, and I could explain then, which suited me just fine. I didn’t want to tell her I was pregnant on the phone. I’d already done that with my parents, and it had been very, very strange. They were happy, though. Maybe a little worried because it was Mitch who was the father, and I hadn’t even gotten around to telling them he didn’t know.

I had an appointment with the doctor in the morning, and Irina picked me up from home, since she wanted to come with me. I had no problem with that. It was nice not to have to do it alone.

It was my second visit at the doctor. I’d just barely been present on the first one; I only remembered a million tests, including every STD test known to man. He’d muttered about my BMI being low, and I’d told him I’d been a dancer, realizing that I for the first time had been able to say it in past tense without a tug in my heart—that was something.

This time it was a lot shorter. Just my weight, I’d gained two pounds, which he said was good, blood pressure, which was fine, and then he listened to the baby’s heartbeat. Somehow, being rid of the pressure of telling Mitch had made me more susceptible to it all, and I realized that the sound I was hearing was my baby’s actual heartbeat. My child was

living inside of me. When the doctor pulled the device away, I took his hand.

“Please, just a few more seconds.”

He smiled and did as I’d asked. It was amazing, and I looked at Irina with a big smile.

“That’s my baby!”

“I know,” she said and leaned forward to give me a kiss. “A strong heart.”

“Yes,” the doctor said with a nod. “It all sounds good. Next time is the ultrasound so you’ll see the baby as well!”

That sounded amazing. I’d see my baby!

While we were on our way out of the hospital, I had to stop. I sat down on a chair and started to cry, but this time I wasn’t upset. I was really happy. Irina sat down next to me and took my hand, and when I looked at her, she was crying, too.

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I stood up when Lisa walked into the diner. She looked around for a few seconds, and when she saw me, she gave me a big smile, and I exhaled. At least she wasn’t angry with me. She half ran up and gave me a hug.

“It’s so good to see you. Did you order me wine?”

“Yes,” I pointed at her glass, and we sat down. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. Tell me what happened instead. I thought Mitch had fucked up, but he seemed honestly confused. He thought you’d met some old boyfriend in New York or something.” I watched her empty half the glass and then she took a deep breath. “Okay, sorry. Messy day. Tell me.”

“I’m pregnant.”

She stared at me, picked up her glass again, emptied it, signaled the waiter for another, and then looked at me.

“Does he know?”

“Yes. I told him yesterday.”

“This being Mitch, and him not being half as smart as he can be most of the time, I’m guessing—”

“Actually, he took it pretty well. I think.”

“Really?”

“He knew. Mac had seen me outside an abortion clinic.” She eyed me. “I just needed to know,” I tried to explain.

“I understand. Don’t worry. But you’re not doing it?”

“No.”

“So... You and Mitch?”

“I don’t know. We’ve sort of decided to stay friends for now. Or I told him I needed it. I’m still very confused.”

“Don’t blame you for that, either,” she smiled. “It’s a lot to take in.”

“You don’t say.”

“Damn!” She shook her head. “I thought you two were being careful. What happened?”

“Shower sex.”

“Ohhh, hot!” she smiled. At that moment I really, really loved her. “How are you doing, with all this? How do you feel about it?”

I’d panicked, I’d cried, and I’d seen everything just fall apart, but just that day something had changed. I’d heard its heartbeat. I’d heard my baby. It wasn’t the best of situations. In fact, it was a pretty shit situation, but I would figure all that out, and it would be worth it.

“Good. I feel good now. I heard the heartbeat.”

“Aww, how many a minute?”

“163.”

“A girl. It’s a girl.” She noticed my skeptical face. “Yeah, I know it’s an old wives’ tale, but I’m telling you, it’s a girl. We don’t get enough girls.”

“Think the rest of them will be okay with this?”

“Are you shitting me?” she laughed. “They’ll love it. They all love kids. Well, no one has said that they *don’t*, but they’ll be there for you. All of them.”

I did like the thought of my baby having a big family, but it kind of scared me a little, too. There were a lot of them, and I didn’t really know what they’d think of me. One of Mitch’s fuck buddies that he accidentally knocked up, but it was a relief that Lisa seemed to be sure they’d be fine with it.

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The physical therapy had taken a lot longer than usual, since I’d finally admitted to Brett that I was pregnant. He wanted me to keep him updated on what the doctors said regarding my injury and what affect a pregnancy could have on it. I’d honestly not even thought about it, but nerve problems during pregnancies were apparently not uncommon even among perfectly healthy women, so that was slightly depressing. I’d accepted that it would probably mean more pain, but it wasn’t until then I realized just how bad it could become, and smoking some pot for relief was out of the question. If I was going to do this, I was going to do it right. Irina had already set up a diet plan for me, and she made damn sure I followed it.

Since it was my Thursday morning appointment, it was Anita who gave me a lift home. She kept insisting on it, and she still told me every time how nice it was of me that I’d agreed to let her husband have my appointment.

“So you’re pregnant?” Anita asked me as she drove me home.

“Yes.” And I realized that it was maybe the first time I felt really at ease about it. I gave her a big smile. “Yes, I am.”

“That’s wonderful. How far along are you?”

“About fifteen weeks.”

“It’s so exciting,” Anita smiled.

“Do you have children?”

“No, I don’t. My husband has a girl from a previous marriage, but she’s all grown up now.” She put a hand on my knee. “And the father? Is he involved?” She must’ve noticed my expression. “I’m sorry, that’s none of my business. It’s just I know you live with your aunt.”

“No. Don’t worry about it. It’s complicated.”

She laughed. “It’s always complicated. I think the thing hanging between their legs scrambles their brain and makes everything more complicated than it needs to be.”

“That could be it,” I agreed. “But we had a... complicated thing going even before I became pregnant.”

“You’ve been through a lot of difficulties, you’ll get through this one, too,” she said and returned her hand to the steering wheel of the old Volvo she was driving.

It was the only car I’d seen her drive, and it had a faint smell of manure. I’d asked about it once, and apparently they had a small household farm with chickens. She’d offered to show me, but I wasn’t very interested. Frankly, chickens kind of scared me. I knew it was silly, but it was just something about how they moved their heads that freaked me out.

Since her husband had been in his accident, the farm had been a way for them to start again. It had been more Anita’s dream to have a small farm, live with nature, and be self-sufficient, but he’d agreed. It all sounded a bit hippie to me, but who was I to judge? I’d spent the first twenty-five years of my life doing nothing but dancing, and that seemed about as deranged as living in the middle of nowhere growing carrots and whatnot. I had wondered how her life ambition to be at one with nature added up to an old shitty Volvo, which was hardly environmental friendly, but again, who was I to judge? Given her fashion sense, I had a feeling they weren’t exactly swimming in cash. I had wondered about how they could afford weekly visits with Brett, but maybe they’d had insurance covering it. That was one thing I hadn’t asked them about, but I had wondered.

“Okay,” she said when she stopped outside my house. “I’ll see you next week, sweetheart.”

“See you, Anita. Take care.”

“You too, darling.”

Irina was waiting for me in the kitchen, and she wasn't alone. Mitch was there, too, and he smiled when he saw me.

“Thought we'd try to figure this out,” he said. “I'll try to stay calm this time.”

“I thought you were pretty calm last time.”

“Fucking hell,” he chuckled. “Still think it's a good thing you told those cops the truth because you are a shitty liar, Anna.”

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Along for the Ride

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It had taken him two weeks, but he was on top of things when it came to the club business again. It had all continued as usual, since Mech and Sisco had covered for him, but Mitch needed to figure out what had been done, and where they were.

Some other things had also been decided; one was that the first meeting with the US side of Ghouls was going to take place the next weekend, and that they were going to Amsterdam six weeks later.

Laura's murder investigation had come to a staggering halt, though. They were all in agreement that it was Hump who'd done it, but they couldn't fucking find him—he was gone.

“How the fuck does someone disappear?” Brick bellowed from his place at the head of the table. “How is that even fucking possible?”

“It's not that hard,” Sisco shrugged. “He's had a lot of time to set it all up, too. I'm more worried about what his next move would be. Anyone got any ideas?”

“Would depend on what he's after,” Bear speculated. “I think it's safe to say it's not going to be a quick retaliation, which would mean it's a slow mind-fuck.”

Brick gave Mitch a worried look. “You need to look after your house, son. Make sure everyone around you is safe. Anna, for example. Maybe you should try to keep her close.”

“We're not exactly...” He had no idea how to end the sentence. “We're keeping it friendly.”

“What the fuck does that mean?” his dad asked.

“Means he's not fucking her.” Mace's chuckle turned into a laugh when Mitch glared at him. “And that look sealed the

deal. Didn't you just buy her a birthday present?"

"Fuck you," Mitch answered, but he had. Unfortunately, the entire club had been around when it was delivered, and it wasn't small. "Can we focus on Hump and not where I stick my dick?"

"What do we know?" Bear said to get the conversation going.

"I talked to Manchu," Mac started. "As far as he knows, Hump was gone the week after he'd been dropped off at the E.R. His house has been sold, and they don't know where anyone in his family is."

"Big family?" Bull asked.

"Not really. An ex-wife, a kid, and a new old lady."

"Rabbit said the same thing, and I'm inclined to believe him," Brick nodded. "I don't think he's had any contact with Hump."

"Sure?" Bull asked. "Those two were close."

Brick looked at Mitch, who nodded. "I'll go through Rabbit's stuff to make sure," he answered Brick's unspoken order.

Things were still frosty between him and his dad, but he was hoping to sort it out. He had a hunch that bringing Anna by to meet the family would be enough. Just to show Brick he really had taken care of his business, and that it wasn't just something he'd said.

"Okay that with Dutch and Chucky at the mother charter before you do. I don't want us to step on any toes while we do this. I'll have a talk to Rabbit eye to eye when we meet him in Englewood next weekend, too." His dad leaned his elbows on the table. "Try to bring Anna into the family at least. Get her closer, I want us to be able to keep an eye on her without freaking her out."

"I was going to anyway. Don't want her to die of shock when she's having the baby and all you ugly fucks show up at the hospital."

As much as he wanted things back to normal with his dad, he wasn't looking forward to bringing Anna closer. It was fucking torture to be around her at the moment, and he usually just wanted to rip off her clothes and fuck her stupid. She'd shown up at the door with a tight tank top the day before, and he'd seen that her usually flat belly wasn't as flat anymore. She had a small bulge, and he was fucking dying to touch it—to touch all of her.

“And the hacking thing?” Bear asked while he put out his smoke. “Anything more on that?”

“There's nothing there,” Mech answered. “The Dutch Ghouls even let us use their guy, Stakkato, and he couldn't trace the fucker, either.”

“I thought you said he was shit?” Sisco asked.

“He is shit, but he's also really careful, which is why he's not very successful. It's like he's poking us with a really fucking long stick.”

That wasn't a very good description at all, but it meant the rest of the table were nodding like they understood, which was the important thing, so Mitch didn't protest. It was always better to leave the explaining to Mech.

“Have any of the other clubs had any problems?” Dawg asked.

“No,” Mitch answered. “None of them, and they've had their guys double-check. I've checked the ones that don't have good enough tech guys.”

“I didn't expect him to mess around with anyone else, either,” Brick said. “I know what you said about Hump not knowing enough about computers, but he doesn't have to be alone in this. He must've gotten help. Do we know what his accounts looked like and how much he might've had left?”

“We emptied them,” Mitch answered. “We went through all of it, and even found an offshore account, but I'm not saying we can't have missed something. And if he's got a hacker friend, he could be making money now.”

“Wouldn’t he need medical help?” Sisco asked. “We chopped off his hand.”

“Not necessarily,” Bull said. “People survived that shit during the Middle Ages, so there’s not much needed once the bleeding stops as long as he didn’t get an infection or some shit like that. Has anyone called Russ on this?”

Russ was the Nomad President, and practically a living legend in the Marauders. He’d joined in his early twenties, and he was the only member ever who had started out, and stayed, in the Nomads. He had a base in Vegas, a house he owned with his Old Lady, and she lived there with their four kids. Veronica-Lynn, or Ronnie as everyone called her, was actually Wolf’s niece. Mitch had some vague memories of a bottle blonde who wore an enormous amount of makeup who used to hang at the club when he was younger. He’d never heard the full story about how Russ and Ronnie ended up together, but he had a feeling it was something because Brick’s jaw still tensed up for a second when Russ was mentioned.

Bull, on the other hand, had always been close to Russ, probably because they were both crazy as fuck.

“No,” Brick said with a laugh once the tension in his jaw released. “Give him a call, Bull. No fucking idea why we didn’t think about that. We’re obviously too fucking focused on computers and shit when we don’t even think about calling our own damn members. He’s coming to Englewood for the meet there. Give him a call now, and he might have some news for us next weekend.”

The rest of church was mostly practical stuff. Mitch was meeting up with Sisco once the meeting was over, and they were going to work on the finances, but he took a beer by the bar with Brick and Bear while he was waiting for Sisco.

“You know he’s gonna wanna come here,” Bear chuckled.

“Yeah, I know,” Brick said.

“It’s been over a decade, might be time to let that shit go.”

“I have. Just... fucking hell! She was Wolf’s niece and he nailed her in secret for five years.”

“On the bright side,” Bear said with a smile. “His visits don’t empty the clubhouse of strippers anymore.”

“What? Russ used to empty the clubhouse?”

“He’s got some... preferences... tended to bruise them up a little. Not too bad, but you know how strippers are about bruises.”

Most of the girls didn’t mind some kink, some spanking, or even being tied up, but the strippers didn’t like getting bruised. Bruises usually meant they lost money. It was a huge turn-off for most guys who visited the strip clubs, so they tended to get a bit pissed if they had handprints all over their ass after a night with a member.

Mitch noticed Sisco coming out from his room, so apparently he’d had his dick sucked and was ready for some work. Mitch turned to his dad.

“I’ll see you later.”

“Sure,” Brick said.

He was about to ask if it was okay if he came by the next day, but then realized it was just odd. Things might be tense between them, but there was a good chance Brick would get more pissed if he asked. He’d never made sure it was okay that he came by before, so why start now?

-o0o-

It was Anna’s birthday, and it had started out at her place, with Irina and Lisa. He’d taken her up to Brick and Mel after they’d had some weird cake that he was suspicious about, since it was named after Pavlov, and he fucking knew who Ivan Pavlov was.

He and Anna had sort of reached an agreement. He was paying all the bills, he’d insisted on that one, and she was keeping him informed. He got her a maternity pillow for her birthday. It was the most insane thing he’d ever seen, but Vi had said that Anna would need one. The weird-looking pillow was the only reason Vi had able to sleep during the nights when she was alone, and since Anna was going to sleep alone

—at least he hoped she was, unless she was with him—she would need the huge pillow.

Those hours in Irina’s kitchen, when they’d discussed how to deal with her being pregnant, had confirmed that he was still insanely attracted to her, and she to him. He didn’t want to push it, though, because he didn’t want a quick fuck. He wanted all of her and unless he thought he could have that, he’d drop it and go with her insane ‘friends’ idea.

Bringing Anna to his dad’s place would show him that he’d taken care of business. And if she was gonna have Brick’s grandkid, it was best she got used to him. Mitch wasn’t worried; Brick had a way with younger women, and he’d win her over in no time.

“Are you sure about this?” Anna asked with a worried expression. “I don’t want them to feel bad. I mean, it’s not like they knew it was my birthday or... you know. And if they ask about us...”

“Anna, I’ll take care of this. They won’t feel bad, and knowing what Mel, she’s gonna bake you a cake in less than an hour. And it won’t be named after a crazy Russian mind-controlling scientist.”

“What?” Anna stared at him and then she started to laugh. “It’s not named after Ivan Pavlov! It’s named after Anna Pavlova, a ballerina, and I’m named after her!”

“Suuure it is,” he muttered as he got out of the truck. “I know women, this is all about ‘conditioning,’ making men do what they want you to. Drooling as soon as you come near us.”

“You think I’m using the Pavlov technique on you with the help of a meringue and fruit cake?”

He halted. “Fuck! That was meringue?”

“Yes,” she smiled. “And you missed it. I’m gonna eat all of it when I go home tonight.”

“Damn!”

“And *that’s* is how you use a Pavlova to train men,” she giggled as they walked up to the door.

She was right. She totally had him, he was still obsessing about missing that cake because he loved meringue. Next time they put some weird food on the table he’d just eat it.

“Don’t push it,” he grumbled as he opened the door to the house. “Anyone home?!”

“Woof,” she said to him.

He really wanted to just grab her and kiss her, both for the barking referring to Pavlov and for being her usual funny and cute self. Things had been a bit weird and tense between them, but so far that day she’d been like she had been before. But back then he could kiss her. He really missed kissing her whenever he felt like it.

Mel was the first to come and meet them.

“Oh, hi!” she said when she saw Anna. “Welcome.”

“It’s Anna’s birthday. Thought I’d bring her by.”

“Of course!” Mel smiled and gave Anna a hug. “Happy birthday.”

“Hey!” his dad yelled as he came down the stairs. “And the ballerina! Good to see you and happy birthday.”

“Thank you,” Anna mumbled.

Brick grabbed her and gave her a hug. “Let me know if I need to talk to him again.”

“No!” Anna exclaimed. “No need at all. It’s all fine. We’re great.”

“Woof,” Mitch mumbled as he walked past her.

As suspected, Mel and Eliza immediately started on a cake. A normal, American, chocolate cake. Anna immediately told them about him not eating her cake, because he thought it was named after Ivan Pavlov, which Mel of course found hilarious. They continued to mock him, and he concluded that Anna would fit right into his family.

They didn't say anything about Anna being pregnant. He didn't seem to be able to find the proper opening for it in the middle of all the 'Mocking Mitch,' and he thought it might be easier for Anna if he told Mel and Eliza when she wasn't there. Instead they had cake and talked, and if Brick had told Mel about Anna being pregnant, she didn't mention it either. When it started to get late, he stood up, and Mel walked Anna to the door while Brick stayed behind.

"I'm just gonna take her home," Mitch said to his dad. "I'll be back afterwards to talk to the rest of you about it."

"Good," he nodded.

He dropped Anna off and then went back to his dad and Mel's. They were waiting in the kitchen with serious faces.

"Don't think for a second I missed that bump," Mel said and glared at him.

"I didn't think you would," he said as he sat down.

"Is it yours?" Mel asked. Brick must've grimaced or something because her next line wasn't to Mitch. "What? Do you need me to introduce you to your own son? It's not such a weird question! I mean she's nice, but steady relationships are not really Mitch's thing, and he's usually pretty up front about that."

"It's mine," Mitch said, leaving no room for any doubt. "I know it is."

He rubbed his face and leaned his elbows on the table with a sigh. It had been a long day. In some ways a really good day, but in others it had been pure hell. He wasn't used to having to restrain himself around Anna, and he had been forced to restrain himself not to jump her. He honestly hadn't thought she'd been serious about the 'friends' thing, but she obviously was, and he was wondering how the fuck this was going to work if they were going to be 'friends' until the kid turned eighteen.

"So you and her...?" Mel wondered.

"Friends," Mitch answered with a dry chuckle.

“I’d say that’s going well,” Brick laughed.

“It’s awesome. Now that you know, I’m gonna go home and jerk off and take a cold shower.”

Now it was Mel who laughed. When he looked at her she tried to hide it by putting her hands over her mouth, but it just made her bright red instead.

“Why is everyone so fucking amused by this?”

“It’s just...” Mel started and dried her cheeks. “So not you to pine over someone and... I’m sorry. Mitch, I know you, you’ll figure this out.”

“Thanks. If you manage to say it without laughing your ass off, I might believe you.”

Mel got up and walked over to his side of the table. She sat down and put her arms around him, giving him a sweet hug. He still remembered the first time she’d hugged him. She’d been with his dad for maybe six months, and he’d been in a fight at school. Brick’d had a go at him, yelled about him being an idiot, and once he was out of the room, Mel had hugged him and told him that the reason Brick was pissed about him being an idiot was because he knew how smart he could be. He’d realized then that the woman had magic hugs, and fuck it if they still didn’t work. He leaned his head against her and patted her arm.

“Honey,” she whispered, “this is going to sound a little high school, but she likes you.”

“She’s scared we’re gonna mess it up and thinks it’s better if we stay friends so we can raise the kid together. “

Mel laughed again, and she didn’t even try to hide it. “That’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard.” She kissed his cheek. “Don’t worry about it. Let her get used to being pregnant and just be there for her. I think you might need some time to get used to the idea, too.”

“Probably, but I’m looking forward to having a kid.” He looked straight at Brick when he said it. “I am.”

“I know,” his dad said. “I know you like kids, and I get that this isn’t how you wanted one, but it’s still your kid, and that woman is your kid’s mom.”

“I’ll take care of her, Dad. We’re figuring this out.”

“Good, because you need to keep her close, and you need to keep your head clear.”

“I will.” He would. He had no idea how he’d keep her safe, but he would.

“Gotta say,” Mel giggled. “Really looking forward to another grandkid!”

“Yup,” Brick agreed. “If it’s a girl, gonna let her dance ballet?”

“They have cakes named after ballerinas on their birthdays. I doubt I’ll have anything to say about that.”

“Smart man,” Mel said and patted his cheek. “Ask your dad, when it comes to girls, you’re just along for the ride.”

“Think your sister would be a crazy feminist who yells ‘death to the patriarch’ while she beats up her date if she’d listened to me?”

“She what?” He hadn’t heard about that, but it did sound like something Eliza would do.

“A boy took things a bit further than she was comfortable with. She beat him up,” Mel explained.

“Who?”

“We’ll get to that,” Brick said with a nod, meaning they’d talk about it when Mel wasn’t around.

“Not strange that she beat him up,” Mitch said with a shrug. “That’s what we taught her.”

“Oh, it’s not the beating I have a problem with,” Brick smiled. “It’s what she yelled that kind of gets to me.”

Mitch couldn’t stop laughing, but he was really proud of his baby girl. He’d never admit it to his dad, but Mac and he had probably had something to do with her being very ‘female

rights.' Sure, he liked having willing girls around, but he didn't want his sister to be one. And if he ever had a daughter, he'd do the same.

-o0o-

His frustration around Anna didn't subside. On the good side, it didn't get worse, but he wasn't sure that was even possible, because fucking shit he wanted to touch her. He wanted to stroke her belly, his baby, and he wanted to touch her everywhere else, too. The urge to kiss her was fucking killing him at times. To the point where he was glad to get out of town for the big meeting with the Smiling Ghouls MC in Englewood.

It didn't take him long to spot the massive Nomad president, and Russ met them with a big grin.

"How's Fertile Myrtle?" Bull asked him with a hug. "Knocked up again?"

"Nah. I think she's done," Russ laughed, and then he turned to Mitch. "Doesn't feel like all that fucking long ago you had pimples, but I heard you've knocked someone up, and that you're managing to piss off a seasoned ex-member."

"Heard anything about Hump?" Brick asked.

"Let's get inside. I've talked to Chucky, we can use their chapel for a while. Say hello to everyone, and let them get drunk while we talk."

Mitch wasn't really paying attention, but he greeted everyone, managed to have a quick word with Dutch, and then he went to the Chapel to wait for the others. His dad was the next one in, and he sat down next to Mitch.

"How are you dealing with this?"

"Honestly, it's getting frustrating as fuck. I can't find shit about him, and I'd feel a lot worse about it if it wasn't for the fact that Mech can't either. I've asked a few of the other clubs' geeks for help, but he, his old lady, and his daughter are all gone."

"That worries me," Brick mumbled.

“No fucking shit. No one should be able to disappear that completely, and he definitely shouldn’t be able to. Even if Russ has heard something, it doesn’t mean—”

“Yeah, take it easy,” Brick said and shook his head. “Let’s not get ahead of ourselves. I’m not worried we won’t find him. Sooner or later we will.”

“I’m worried what he’ll do before we find him,” Mitch said. “And I’m wondering why he’s waiting.”

“He’s messing with your head,” Brick said. “Like the hacking, it’s all to fuck with you, and if you don’t keep cool, he’s won. Keep that in mind and stay sharp.”

At the same time, Russ walked into the Chapel. He sat down and lit a smoke with a smile.

“I talked to Wolf the other day. He sends his best.”

“How is he doing?” Mitch asked.

“Think he’s tired as hell. Ronnie was there last week with all the kids,” Russ chuckled. Russ and Ronnie had four kids, which was why the other members tended to call Ronnie ‘Fertile Myrtle.’ “He’s putting an ear to the ground regarding Hump, too.”

“What did you find?” Brick asked.

“Not much, which hadn’t struck anyone as strange until I started asking questions. The assumption so far has been that Hump got with the rules and didn’t try to contact anyone and even moved out of Emporia. But staying out of touch and disappearing from the face of the earth are two different things.” Russ turned to Mitch. “Is there more to the story?”

“Like what?” Mitch asked with a laugh. “Like, did I fuck his daughter in the ass?”

“Would anyone be surprised if you’d done something like that?” Russ said with a crooked smile.

“Have you seen his daughter?” Mitch asked with a wink. “I wouldn’t fuck her wearing a full rubber suit.”

“Yeah, I know what you mean,” Russ laughed. “If he was so shit with computers, how did he steal money from us?”

“He was shit with computers, but great with numbers,” Mitch said.

“More than one way to skin a cat,” Russ nodded. “I found two leads that could be something. Looks like he’s been in Texas for a while, and there are rumors he made a new friend. Or rather, he sent out his daughter to make a new friend.”

“So did you find his trail or his daughter’s?” Brick asked.

“His daughter’s, but I suspect he’s been there, too, because I found his ex-wife,” Russ smiled.

“What did she say?”

“Nothin’. I found her behind the tool shed on the farm where I assume he used to live.”

“Buried?” Mitch guessed.

“Yup.”

“What did you do?”

“Reburied her.” Russ shrugged. “Just wanted to find out if he’d dumped his old lady or his ex-wife.”

“Jesus.” Brick shook his head. “So he skips town with his old lady and ex-wife, kills the ex-wife and sends his daughter out to find new friends. Why the fuck is the daughter helping him with that?”

“We don’t really know what order he did those things in,” Mitch pointed out. “He might’ve killed the ex-wife after his daughter had done what he wanted her to do. What friends did he have his daughter make?”

“Geek friends.”

“Not top shelf geek friends,” Mitch muttered.

“Probably need a better looking daughter to get the top shelf,” Russ laughed.

“Doubt that. Most of those guys only dream of seeing an actual, real life pussy, but I doubt Hump would know how to

recognize a top shelf hacker.”

None of Russ’s news, with exception of Hump having been in Texas, was much of a surprise to Mitch. He knew Hump couldn’t have done the hacking attempts without help.

“Did we do a search for his daughter?” Brick asked, and Mitch rolled his eyes, which made Russ laugh out loud. “Okay, sorry, had to ask. Do we have any details about the hacker?”

“No,” Russ admitted. “I just found out that his daughter had all of a sudden been all over a bunch of them, and disappeared just as suddenly. I took that as a sign that she got what she wanted. A few of them promised to get back to me if they hear anything, or if anyone of them suddenly go missing.”

“And his Old lady?” Mitch asked. “I’ve done searches and shit, but I’m not sure I remember her.”

“She was a sweetbutt for a while. He pulled her from the clubhouse and into an apartment for his pleasure only,” Brick summed it up. “A while later, his wife found out, they divorced and he marked her. According to Rabbit, both of the women are greedy bitches.”

“And we know for sure that she isn’t behind the skimming?” Russ asked. “You know, the power of the pussy leading him on to get money. The power of the pussy can make you do stupid shit.”

“Yeah, you should know,” Brick muttered.

“Wanna fill me in on what the fuck happened?” Mitch chuckled. “Dad gets all bent out of shape when the topic of you and pussy pops up. Something about Wolf’s niece?”

“She was off limits, and I started something up with her.”

“He kind of skipped the part where she was nineteen and a mess,” Brick growled. “Or the fact that his type of starting up includes bruising.”

Mitch stared between the two of them, and then he started laughing. “Jesus. In his defense,” he said with a nod towards

Russ, “the four kids are kind of a hint that she liked it.”

“Thanks,” Russ said. “But it’s not about that, and you know it.”

“I know,” Mitch agreed. “Back to Hump. I’ll hit the forums and find out who from Texas could’ve done the code used on our system.”

“You can do that?” Russ asked with a raised eyebrow.

“Codes are like fingerprints. Most have reused parts, but it can still be a hint. If we found the guy who did the original code, it can lead further.” He had a feeling he’d lost both of the older dudes along the way, and sighed. “It can help, just trust me.”

“Think we’re both gonna take your word for it,” his dad said. “But we need to keep a wide net, so you stay on this too,” he said to Russ.

“Got all my guys on it,” Russ nodded. “They’re spreading the word.”

-o0o-

Later that night, Mitch was sprawled out on a couch, watching a girl work a pole. Mac sat down next to him.

“Can I sit here or would that be cramping your style?”

“Nah,” Mitch shrugged. “I’m kinda starting to get it.”

“Get what.”

Mitch pointed towards the half-naked girl. “She’s hot and all, but...”

“She’s very nice, but she’s not what you want,” Mac laughed. “So how long are you gonna walk around with a massive set of blue balls before you get the girl you do want?”

“Thanks for reminding me. Whatta you think about them?” he asked and nodded towards the members of the Smiling Ghouls who were appreciating the attention the sweetbutts were giving them.

Mac looked at them in silence for a while. “I was gonna ask you the same.”

“I think it could be a good deal, but what I’m wondering is what’s being said over our heads.”

“Between the Cartel and the European branch of them?” Mac asked. “You think there are things going on over our heads?”

“You know, those dudes over there think they’re the head of their MC, but I’ve found that the head of any group is the part that’s bringing in the big bucks, and that’s not those guys in the Ghouls.”

It had bugged him during the entire meeting, and he knew his dad enough to know that he was thinking the same thing. The US branch of the Smiling Ghouls was basically living off the money the Dutch charters were making. It should be clear to anyone that without the Dutch, they’d make fuck all. Mitch was wondering if the Dutch Ghouls were aware, and he kind of thought they were. He had a feeling that getting the okay from these guys wouldn’t in any way mean they were in. Just like he knew that getting the okay from Brick didn’t mean that the cartel was in. In this case, the cartel *was* in, but they had needed to confirm it before getting in on the deal.

If shit got problematic in the Ghouls, it would spill out over them, too, and he hoped they’d be able to stay the fuck out of the fire when the house of Smiling Ghouls was lit up. He had a feeling that nothing would be set within the Marauders before Chucky and some of the other presidents had met with the Dutch branch in Amsterdam.

But with more and more states either legalizing or at least talking about legalizing pot, they needed to expand their business elsewhere, and this was a good way to do it. That reason hadn’t been mentioned, but he was pretty sure at least a few of the others in Marauders had thought about it. He just hoped they didn’t do it for that reason alone. Greed was generally a stupid reason.

Can I Rub Her?

-o0o-

It had been about a month since Mitch found out, and I was avoiding thinking about what he might be up to, and with whom, when I wasn't around. He'd been away for a few days, but he'd called me every night to make sure I was okay. I wasn't sure if it was a good or a bad sign that he did.

I had to admit it, though, every time I saw him, I wanted to rip off his clothes and just ride him. After some research, I had realized I was obviously one of the women who got horny as hell while pregnant. This could've been a great deal for both Mitch and me if I hadn't come up with the great idea that we should just be friends. An idea that had made perfect sense when I suggested it to him, and also whenever he wasn't in my line of sight, but it always seemed like the most stupid idea I'd ever had when he was close by. Whenever I knew he was coming over, or I was on my way to him, I both loved and hated the thought of seeing him.

In short, I was extremely confused.

This was the first time since my birthday three weeks earlier that I wasn't even thinking about getting some just because I knew he was on his way. Instead I was impatiently tapping the floor in the hallway with my cane. When he finally rang the doorbell, I yanked the door open.

"Let's get going," I said, and headed towards the elevator as fast as I could.

It was time for my ultrasound, and I couldn't wait. Hearing the baby's heartbeat had been amazing, and I was sure *seeing* it would be even more amazing—I couldn't wait.

On my way to the elevator I stopped, since I realized there was something I had forgotten to run by him, and I wanted it settled before we got to the hospital.

“What?” he asked, and he sounded more than a little annoyed. “Babe, come on!”

“What are you pissed about?”

“I... Fuck! I’m eager, okay? Mac said the ultrasound was fucking awesome. So...” He waved towards the elevator who had arrived. “Get in and let’s get the fuck going.”

“I want to know if it’s a boy or a girl.”

“Okay,” he agreed and took my hand and tried to drag me into the elevator.

“Sure? I mean... I just want to know.”

“Babe,” he said and took a firm hold of my shoulders. “That’s fine, I’m fine with that, but we need to move our asses, *now!*”

I didn’t object, since I liked how he seemed as eager as I felt, and followed him into the elevator. He didn’t talk in the car on our way to the clinic, or while dragged me inside. While we were waiting, his leg was jumping, and he kept looking at the clock on the wall. When they called my name, he jumped up and dragged me along with him again.

“Mitch, please! I can’t walk that fast.”

“Fuck!” he said as he turned around. “I’m sorry, Anna.”

He took it slightly easier, but still sort of dragged me by hooking an arm around my waist. It felt like all he wanted to do was to lift me up and carry me inside to make sure I got there faster.

“Eager much?” I asked with a laugh.

“Yup.” His smile grew wide. “Like I said, Mac said this was awesome.”

“Miss Dobronravov, always a pleasure,” Dr. Magda Boyarov said with a big smile when we walked into the room. She turned to Mitch and extended her hand. “And this is the father?”

“Yes,” I nodded. “Mitch Baxter.”

Mitch took her hand with a nod, and then sat down at a chair next to the gurney. He didn't say anything during the regular examinations, but leaned forward in anticipation when the doctor told me to get ready while she went to get the machine. I took a deep breath.

I'd picked Dr. Boyarov part because of her Russian name, which was a bit shallow, I knew that, but it felt comforting somehow. Mitch had teased me about it, and he gave me an amused look as soon as Dr. Boyarov turned her back towards us, but he didn't say anything.

I sighed again, and Dr. Boyarov halted and looked at me, "I can see that wrinkle. What are you worried about?"

"Everything," I admitted. "Mostly that I haven't felt it move yet."

"It's not uncommon to not feel movements until week twenty, especially when it's your first."

"Okay," I mumbled. "Can we find out if it's a boy or a girl?"

"I'll do my best," she said as she left the room.

I was on my back, with my shirt up under my breast, and I kept staring at the ceiling to not look at Mitch.

"So..." he started. "Five pounds?"

That was how much weight I'd gained so far.

"Shut up!" I laughed.

There was something I'd been wondering since my New York weekend, and I'd wanted to ask him, but hadn't been able to find a good time for it. This was the first time we were on neutral ground and not at his or my place, and I was trying to gather my courage when he interrupted me.

"Can I rub it?"

I wasn't really thinking and just answered to get to the point where I could ask my own question.

"Sure."

I felt his hand on me, and when he stroked my belly, I kind of lost it, so I put my hand on top of his to stop him.

“Can I ask you something?” I mumbled. I’d missed his hands on me, and he was still stroking me with his thumb, but he nodded. “The heart, is it a real diamond?”

He answered without taking his eyes from my belly, and he did it with a laugh. “Yeah.”

I wanted to ask him why, and if he was bloody insane. I didn’t know much about diamonds, but a pink diamond that size must’ve cost a damn fortune, but before I could ask, Dr. Boyarov was back.

Any thoughts about diamonds or Mitch’s hands were gone. I couldn’t wait to finally to see my baby, and possibly find out what it was. At the same time, I was nervous about something being wrong with it.

“It’s probably a boy,” I said to Mitch. “You all have boys.”

“Would that bother you?”

“No. They need more male ballet dancers.”

His horrified stare made me laugh. I assumed that having his son become a ballet dancer hadn’t been something he’d considered a possibility, and he definitely didn’t like the thought.

The doctor squirted some gel on my stomach, and once the stick was there, I couldn’t take my eyes off the screen. I felt Mitch grab my hand, and I squeezed it.

“First I’m going to do some measurements and try to give you a more exact delivery date,” she smiled. “Get the boring details out of the way before we get to the goodies.”

I kept staring at the screen, trying to see something.

“I’d say eighteen weeks along, just like we’d guessed, so it’s a mid-September baby,” she said with another smile.

I could’ve told her the exact day I had gotten pregnant, but the exact details of the conception seemed like over-sharing, so I just nodded.

She pointed at the screen. “And this here, is the heart. Can you see it?”

“Yeah...” Mitch said in a heavy breath. “Fucking hell.”

“Head is here.” She marked a circle with her fingertip on the screen. “And it looks like it’s sucking on its fingers. They do that to learn how to swallow. This is the spine here, and give me a second.”

I wanted to ask if she knew what it was, but somehow I couldn’t do anything but stare. That was my baby, right there, and I could see its heart beating. It was alive and it was okay—or I hoped it was.

“Does it all look okay?”

“Yes, it looks perfect.” She leaned closer. “And if I was a gambling woman, I’d put a lot of money on this little perfection being a girl.”

“A girl!” I laughed.

Mitch leaned down, and for a second I thought he was going to give me a kiss, but at the last minute he moved upwards and pressed his lips against my forehead instead.

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I wasn’t walking to the car. I was floating on clouds. Or rather hobbling on clouds, but I really couldn’t have cared less. We had pictures, and I kept looking at mine over and over again. I was having a baby girl! When I took the picture from my bag for the third time, Mitch took it from me with a laugh.

“You’re gonna wear it out. Put it back and take it home and frame it.”

“I will.”

He helped me to get into the truck, and I watched him as he walked over to the driver’s side. He was still smiling, and he’d been smiling since we left the examination room. Considering the slightly shaky start when he found out about the baby—Sprout—he was really happy about all this now. It was hard to tell which one of us had the biggest smile.

“Lisa and some of the others are at the clubhouse. If you’re okay with it, they wanted us to go there when we were done.”

“I know, and that’s okay.”

Lisa had already warned me that they’d all be waiting for us, and I’d promised her I’d follow Mitch there.

“So it’s a real diamond?” I asked as he drove out of the parking lot. “Why did you buy me a diamond?”

He looked at me with raised eyebrows and a smile. “How did you figure it out?”

“Jens, my old roommate said that no one would put something that tacky next to something so beautiful unless it was a real diamond.”

“Tacky?” he laughed. Then he nodded. “That is true. It would’ve been tacky if it wasn’t real.”

“I’ll give it to the baby,” I mumbled. “I’ll keep the babushka, though.”

“Keep the diamond, too. I gave it to you, so it’s yours.” He turned to me and smiled. “I’ll get my baby girl diamonds of her own.”

I didn’t know what to say, I couldn’t find the words, and I was scared of what might come out if I actually opened my mouth. He’d bought me a diamond. And he’d bought it before Christmas. I’d known it had been more than just sex, and he’d pointed that out, too, but I hadn’t really realized how early he’d started to see it as something else. Because I seriously doubted he bought diamonds for the girls he just slept with—there was no way he’d be able to afford that.

When we arrived at the clubhouse, it was packed. There were people everywhere, and when Mitch announced we were having a girl, there were cheers, and that’s when I truly, for the first time, understood why they’d all been trying to say I needed to get used to the club. It didn’t take me more than ten minutes before I needed some space, and I searched the room for the violet hair. She wasn’t hard to find, since she was in a corner as usual.

“Would it be rude of me to say I’m glad you’re a part of this, too?” I asked as I sat down. “At least there’s one person who’s not... extreme.”

“Yeah. Stopped noticing it when I was a kid. I usually just hide away in a corner.”

“I’ll stick to you then.”

Mel came over a while later and handed me a cup of tea, warning me that they were starting to break out the booze, but she’d take me home if Mitch wasn’t in shape for it, which I doubted he would be. I kept hearing shouts about having a drink for the first guy in the club who’d have to carry ballet shoes, so apparently they all assumed Sprout would become a ballerina. Given how quickly they started yelling those things, I had a hunch they’d already teased him about it.

Irina called to tell me she was on her way home, so I got up and walked over to Mitch. He gave me a huge smile and put his hands on my belly and whispered,

“If you shut up about it, Sprout, I’ll carry your ballet shoes.” Then he looked up at me. “Hi!”

“Hi. You’re drunk.”

“Not really. Want me to take you home?”

“No, you’re drunk,” I laughed. “Mel said she could take me, so stay here and get more drunk. And for the record, I always carried my own shoes. Shoes are sacred, we don’t trust anyone else with our shoes.”

“Really?” Brick said with a smile.

“Yes, but my dad always carried my tutus,” I winked at Mitch, and he was looking up at me with a big smile. “I might have a couple you can practice with. They’re big and always in the way.”

“Tutus?”

“Yes. I’m leaving now.”

“I’ll walk you out,” he mumbled and stood up, still smiling. As we walked out he leaned towards me. “I’m not

gonna carry her fucking tutu.”

“Wanna bet on that?” I asked with a chuckle. He put his arm around my waist without answering, and we stopped where Mel was waiting in her car. “Hey, I got a question,” I said hesitantly.

“What?” he asked and turned to stand in front of me, but he was still holding my hand.

“I was thinking... that... maybe I’d go and see a ballet. Soon.” I wasn’t sure where to look and ended up staring at our joined hands. “If you’d still go with me?”

“Already told you I would,” he answered. When I looked at him, he was still focusing on my belly. “Got a question for you.”

“Okay.”

“Can I rub her now and then?” His eyes traveled up and met mine. “If you’re okay with it.”

“I’m okay with it,” I said and moved his hand to my belly. He laid it flat over it and smiled. Parts of me were terrified, but mostly I thought he deserved it. “That’s your girl, after all, and if you’re going to carry around her tutus you should at least get to rub her a little.”

“I’m not gonna carry her tutu,” he said with a smile, still holding his hand on me, carefully stroking.

“I’ve seen you with kids, Mitch. Pretty sure she’ll be able to make you do anything she wants.”

He laughed and leaned forward to give my forehead a kiss. “Think you might be right. Don’t you dare tell her that, though.”

“She’ll figure it out. All girls do.” I took his hand and gave it a squeeze. “I’ll talk to you tomorrow.”

“Yeah. I’m gonna go inside and hear more about all the pink shit I’m gonna have to buy. Let me know when I’m going to the ballet.”

I nodded and got into the car. Mel looked at me when I buckled up.

“All good?” she asked.

“Yeah. I just... He once told me he’d take me to the ballet when I was ready, and I think I’m ready.”

I’d been thinking about it the for last month. Somehow I’d landed in this... being a mom thing, and it had made me accept that I wasn’t a dancer anymore. So maybe I could be a mom instead. I wanted to see a ballet again, and I still wanted Mitch with me, since he was still the person who only knew me as Anna. I figured I could do it if he was with me. There was also some comfort in going with someone who didn’t actually *like* ballet. I wouldn’t have to talk about it with him, simply since he wouldn’t really understand anything about it.

“That sounds like a really good idea, Anna,” Mel said and started the car. “You know, even if you leave parts of your life behind you, it doesn’t mean you can’t love what you used to be.”

“I know. It’s just been a bit painful to love what I used to be, since I didn’t exactly choose to not be it anymore.” I looked down at Sprout and stroked her. “This is helping, though. Scared me when I found out, but I think this might help me find my place.”

“Kids do that,” she said with a laugh. “They can drive you insane, but they can really help you find your place, too. At least you have something real to fight for. I’m glad you’re letting Mitch and the rest of us in on this. Really glad.”

“Why wouldn’t I?” I asked a bit surprised by the statement.

“Women do that for all kinds of reasons, or just try to hold the guy at arm’s length. But you’re really letting him in.”

“I like him, and I need him. I’ve seen him with kids, and I know what I’m like with kids. I panicked when he left me in a room with Joshua for five minutes. I really don’t know anything about kids. The only family I have is Irina, my mom, and my dad. The last two live in Spain. I’m going to need

help. You're all great with kids, love them. I can't do this on my own, and this baby girl deserves a lot of love."

"She's gonna be fine," Mel said and nodded with a smile. "We take care of family."

I had noticed that, and it made me much calmer. My baby girl would be fine. She'd have loads of people looking out for her.

When I walked into the apartment, Irina met me in the hallway.

"And?" she asked me eagerly.

I took the picture out of my bag and held it up for her with a big smile.

"Here she is. My baby girl!"

"A girl!" Irina yelled and started crying.

I called my parents to give them the news as well and they started crying, too. My baby girl would be so loved. Actually, she already was loved.

-o0o-

After the ultrasound, we slipped into the habit of seeing each other every day, and if I had thought it was bad being in his presence before, it was nothing compared to what it was like to be around him when he was perfectly comfortable with touching me.

It was torture, and I was seriously starting to wonder if I shouldn't just wear a maxi-pad to not... wet through my panties. The only relief had been when we'd had a massive argument over him eating up the sour jellybeans I kept in his truck.

Besides sex, I was craving sour jellybeans, and I'd been leaving them behind all over the place so I'd never be without them. He'd eaten the ones in the car, but I was pretty damn sure he wouldn't try that again. I had yelled at him for the full ride to Mac and Violet's place, and after Violet had chewed him out about the mortal sin of eating a pregnant woman's stash, even Mac told him why that was insanely stupid.

Actually, he used the f-word along with *stupid* and *idiot*. Mitch hadn't touched my stash since, but he touched *me*.

"I've been thinking about a name," I said.

We were at his place. I was nineteen weeks pregnant, and besides the sour jellybean cravings, I was doing well. The horniness really was the only problem. Extremely horny, and Mitch being annoyingly sexy didn't help at all. I was wondering if he was doing something to be even more sexy than usual. Because it was insane, as if his hands were electrified, and I was seriously regretting saying that I was perfectly fine with him touching his kid even if it happened to be inside of me.

I was really happy about the vibrator I'd gotten from the sex shop, but toys weren't the same as the real deal. That didn't mean I didn't make good use of it. Initially, I had been worried the vibrations might be bad for the kid, so I'd asked Lisa. For a while it had seemed like she'd never stop laughing.

But again, sex toys were called *toys* for a reason. It wasn't the same, and I was considering asking Mitch to lie on top of me. I wanted to feel some weight on me, and that alone would probably be enough for me to come.

The night before I had been dreaming of him, and I climaxed in my sleep—as if I was a teenage boy having wet dreams. The thought of the dream alone had me soaking wet, and him next to me with his hand on me was agony. Bringing up the question about a name had been an attempt to get him to move away from me a little, and initially, it worked like a charm.

"And?" he asked and looked away from the TV. "Any ideas?"

"Russians give the middle name after the father, as a patronymic. My name is Petrovna. The -ovna is for 'daughter' and 'Petr' is my dad. So it's 'Petr's daughter' or 'daughter of Petr.' It wouldn't really work with Mitch or Mitchell."

"Mitchellovna. Not really," he laughed.

“If a we make it a matronymic, it would be Annanovna, if that’s okay with you, as a second name.”

“I’m okay with that. Any ideas for the first name?”

I really wished he would take his hand off me, but instead he moved it *underneath* my t-shirt.

“Uhhh. Iskra?”

He started laughing and sat up, which meant he finally removed his hand from me completely, and I took a relieved breath.

“What? You’re serious? No!”

“It means spark. I think it’s nice.”

“Hey! I just agreed to my kid having the middle name Annanovna, so I’m gonna have some fucking say on what I’m gonna actually say when I talk to her.”

“Fine. What would you like her to be called? And if you pick a name ending with a ‘y’ we’re gonna have a bigger problem than when you ate my stash.”

He laughed. “I’m guessing you’re gonna want something Russian for that too?”

“Yeah. Olga,” I said and he stared at me, leaned forward, and grabbed my belly looking straight at me.

“My baby girl is *not*, I repeat, *not* gonna be named Olga. No matter what fucking ballet dancer that has that name.”

I laughed. “No, she’s not. Ania, Alma, Natasha, or Vera then?”

“Alma,” he mumbled. “I like Alma.”

“Then for now, she’s Alma.”

“Gonna be ‘Sprout’ until she comes out. And we’re not telling anyone about the name!”

“Okay.” I took a deep breath. “Would you like something from your family? Your brother named his son after you.”

“Nah, he’ll get why we’re picking Russian names.”

He leaned down and fucking *kissed* my belly. Like, lips on skin kissed, and if I'd thought his hands felt electrified it was nothing, *nothing*, compared to his damn mouth. That maxi-pad would've been welcomed. I got up and pulled down my t-shirt.

"I need to get home."

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah. I'm fine. I just need to get home."

"Okay..." He stood up and grabbed his keys.

"I'll take a cab. Finish the movie."

"Hang on! What the fuck is going on with you? Do I smell bad or something?" He took a step towards me, and I shrugged back. "Anna, just fucking tell me what's going on with you."

"I'm... aroused. Okay? Like all the time, and you... touching me isn't helping."

"Aroused?" He stared at me, and that annoyingly sexy smile spread over his face. "You're horny?"

"Yes, no need to look so damn smug about it. It's normal when you're entering the second trimester. A bumpy road turns me on when I'm on the bus. I'm extremely horny."

"Extremely horny even?" he asked and took a step closer to me. He was so close and smelled so good. "You know..." And another step closer. "I can help you with that, Gimp."

It was the first time since... since before Sprout he'd called me that. I couldn't move. I couldn't do anything but watch him come closer, his lips closing in on mine, and when his hand cupped my cheek, I closed my eyes.

In a sigh, I opened my mouth when he kissed me. It was amazing, just like it had always been amazing with him, and I wrapped my arms around him. I held him close, his tongue was playing in my mouth, and when his thumb brushed my nipple I almost came. He leaned back, looking really pleased, and that was enough to snap me out of it.

"Stop!"

"What?" He looked confused. "You said you were horny."

I started towards the door. “Just let me leave alone, Mitch. I can’t do this.”

“Anna?”

“No!” I yelled and spun around. “This is not okay. I don’t want to be your fuck buddy. I don’t want us to have casual sex until she’s born, or whatever the hell you had in mind. I don’t want any of that. And this, whatever you’re doing, is just confusing.”

I didn’t even wait to see what he was going to say, and in the cab on my way back home, I wondered if it meant he wouldn’t go with me to the ballet. I’d gotten us tickets that weekend, and I didn’t want to go alone. I honestly didn’t think I’d even be able to go alone.

When I got home, I brushed my teeth and went to bed, and it was the first night in weeks were I didn’t reach for my goody drawer. In an attempt to calm down, I lay down and stroked Sprout.

Alma.

I liked the name a lot. It was just one of the names I’d thrown out there, but the more I thought about it, the more I liked it. We hadn’t gotten to the last name, but I had a feeling he’d be pretty adamant about her having his last name, and I didn’t mind that. Alma Baxter. It had a nice ring to it. That’s when I felt it for the first time.

A kick.

I’d felt flutters before, but I hadn’t been sure if they were kicks or just gas. This time I was sure. It was a kick. I’d just felt Alma. I reached for the phone and texted to Mitch. *‘I felt Sprout move!’*

He called me immediately.

“She moved?”

“Yes. A kick!” I laughed.

“That is so awesome. When can I feel that?”

“I don’t know. Probably not in a few weeks.”

“Fuck! Still, she moved. That’s something.”

“Mitch... I’m sorry.”

“Nah. Don’t be. I’m sorry, too.”

“So we’re okay?”

“Definitely okay, babe.”

“So we’re still going to the ballet?”

“Anna, I’ve told you I’d go. I’m not gonna skip it because you’re not putting out.”

“Putting out. Are we sixteen?”

“I know I am in some ways. I’ll talk to you tomorrow. And you should ask Lisa to take you to the sex shop. Sounds like you need it.”

I was still trying to come up with a good retort when he hung up on me.

I wasn’t sure how we had ended up in the habit of talking to or seeing each other each and every day. Not always for hours, but for a short while. I didn’t know how to handle it, and I had a feeling I wasn’t handling it very well at all.

The only thing I was sure of was that I was going ask Lisa to take me to the sex shop, and this time I wasn’t going to be bashful about it. I was gonna go bat shit crazy in there!

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

I Don't Have Dimples

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Mitch watched Anna walk out of the sex shop and into Lisa's car, and she was carrying a big, very full bag. He was dying to find out what she'd bought, but he didn't think Lisa would be helpful when it came to that. He did, however, see the humor in Anna following his advice.

The argument—or whatever the fuck it was—about her being horny...? Yeah, he still wasn't sure exactly what that argument had been about. Well, he sort of was, but he honestly thought her anger was completely uncalled for. He'd been trying to help, for fuck's sake, and it wasn't like he'd sacrifice himself to do it. The opposite—he'd have fucking loved to help her out, since he was horny as hell most of the time around her. Constantly touching her probably didn't help, but he was dying to feel Sprout kick, and he liked being near her—near both of them.

“What's on your mind?” Brick asked when he sat down next to him on the park bench outside the clubhouse.

He shrugged, but decided to take his shot to bring up something that had been bothering him. His dad wouldn't mind. Brick might not agree, but he never minded if someone gave him their honest opinion. Also, it would keep them off the subject of Anna. Mitch was way too fucking confused about that part of his life to want to talk to his dad about it.

“Honestly, Dad, I'm having some concerns about the European stuff.”

“Been wondering when you'd grow the balls to tell me that. What's the problem?”

He wasn't surprised about Brick knowing he had doubts, but he was the kind of man who let you figure out what your problem was in peace.

“They seem like an unstable club. The American side seems cocky as fuck, and it feels like the European side is just humoring them to make sure they stay out of their business. If there are problems, we’re gonna end up in a pretty shitty spot.”

“I’ve thought about it, and I’ve talked to Carlos about it, too,” Brick said and lit his smoke. Carlos was their contact in the cartel. He wasn’t the head guy, but he was the one in charge of the operations that included the Marauders. “There’s a lot of money involved, and a lot of other perks the cartel really wants. He’s aware of the risks, but he also thinks it’s worth it.”

“But is it worth it to us? In the middle of a big club’s civil war and a cartel, we’re pretty fucking small and severely outnumbered,” Mitch pointed out. “And cartels aren’t really the kind of guys who hold back when they’re pissed. I know it’s probably too late to pull the plug now—”

“It is,” Brick nodded.

“But maybe we should try to...” he wasn’t sure how to say it.

“...look for other options,” his dad finished the sentence. “I know. I think you’ve gotten some new perspectives lately that are making you more careful, but I also think you have a point.”

“If that’s what you think, then why did we start this to begin with?”

“Because it wasn’t my call alone. The rest of the clubs wants this. They want more money and something in store if we lose the pot business in the US. I can’t hold back alone with just this club. We’re one of the most important clubs, given our location, but we’re not alone. It’s not a done deal yet. I wanna see what the Dutch say about all of it, especially their situation with their US clubs.”

“Would that make a difference?”

“Yeah. Makes a huge fucking difference. If they admit there’s a rift, they’re not gonna pull any bigger stunts until they’re sure we and the cartel are behind them. If they’re

smart, they know the importance of maintaining good relations with their business partners, because that's how you stay afloat in a war. It puts us in a better position, and will at least give us a heads-up."

Mitch shook his head. "Is there ever a time when you're not way ahead in your plans about what can happen?"

"No," Brick said with a smile. "If I'm not ahead, we're all fucked. I need to be, and I got people like Bear to keep me focused. That's the most important part of being a president, trusting the right people."

He eyed his dad. "Are you *grooming* me?"

"Don't let it get to your head, kid. I'm not done yet."

"Fucking hope you're not."

He'd never thought about it, and quite frankly he'd never really wanted to be president. It wasn't something that was handed down to the son—they weren't kings. That shit was voted, and this was the first time his dad had even hinted about it. He looked at Brick—he was getting older. Not *old*, just older, and Mitch sure as shit hoped Brick didn't expect him to want to take the gavel any time soon. He wasn't even sure he liked the idea, but he didn't *dislike* it as much as he would have if it had been brought up just a year or two earlier. And the second after that thought went through his head, he laughed.

"You fucker! You always know the right time to play your cards."

"That's why I have this," he said and tapped the president patch on his chest. "Don't worry about it."

Mitch shook his head. "Bet you already have the officers set up for me," he chuckled.

"As a matter of fact, I do."

"You're scary." Mitch started laughing. "Why not Mac? He's your oldest."

"Because Mac's the VP. You have the vision, and he's the guy who can haul your ass back when you're out of line."

“Like you and Bear?”

“Like me and Bear,” he confirmed with a smile and tossed the smoke away. “How’s the ballerina?”

The fact that his dad asked about her after the conversation they’d just had, worried him a little. Obviously Anna was a part of his plans, or it might just be that he wanted to make sure Mitch’s head was screwed on right. No matter what happened with Anna, he didn’t think it really mattered. Whatever plans Brick had, they were years ahead, because that’s how his dad made his plans.

“She’s good. She felt Sprout kick the other day, and I’m taking her to the ballet this weekend.”

“You’re going to the ballet?” Brick asked with a raised eyebrow. “Just how long did she have to work on her knees for you to agree to that?”

Mitch knew he was blushing, which wasn’t all that fucking common when it came to him, so his dad started laughing.

“You’re shitting me? You’re still not getting any,” he continued. “How the fuck did you agree to that deal? No pussy but ballet is okay.”

“It’s kind of a long story. I took her to the shooting range months ago, and... I don’t know.” He shrugged. “I offered. She didn’t want to shoot or go the ballet, and I thought it’d be easier if I was with her.”

The smile his dad gave him completely baffled him. It was genuine, warm, and... proud? Mitch was pretty sure he saw pride in the old man’s eyes.

“What?” he asked.

“Nah,” Brick said, still smiling and shaking his head. “Kind of glad to see you grew into a man even outside the club. Always nice to see you’ve done something right as a parent.”

“Didn’t do everything right,” Mitch muttered. “She’s pissed at me, and I’m not really sure why.”

“Would this have something to do with your little brain?”

“Maybe.”

“If you want to understand crazy, go have a talk with your mom,” Brick laughed. “I bet she’s got some good advice for you.” He got up and patted Mitch’s shoulder. “You’ll figure it out, son. There’s a reason I call you Genius, and once your brain adapts to thinking of women as something besides pussy, you’re gonna figure that girl of yours out.”

“She’s not my girl,” Mitch yelled after him.

“Remind your dick about that,” Brick yelled back with a laugh as he strode away.

As much as his dad annoyed him, he did have a point about talking to his mom. She tended to know how things worked, and she’d lived with Brick for a big part of her life. She could probably tell him what the problem was. Most likely in a very undiplomatic way that would include calling Mitch ‘an idiot,’ but he could live with that.

-o0o-

He walked into the small shop located opposite his mom’s hair salon. He’d been there loads of times, and the lady who owned it, Patricia, was one of those slightly older ladies who flirted with everyone. He liked her, and he loved teasing her about her teenage daughter.

“You are a good son,” she mused when he walked inside. “Visiting your mom like this. Send her my love.”

“How do you know I haven’t already been and just stopped by to ravage you on the desk?”

“Darlin’, you are always handsome, but that raggedy mane on your head tells me you haven’t been yet. She’d never let you out of her salon looking like that.”

“You’re a very observant woman,” he said with a wink. “Bet you know what kind of smokes I want.”

“Obviously,” she said and reached for a pack of his brand and dropped it on the counter. “Anything else?”

“If you’re not gonna even give me a little kiss, that’s it, baby.”

“No kiss today,” she laughed. “Everything okay with you, honey?”

“Yeah. Kind of in need of my mom’s love and advice, but I’m fine,” he smiled and grabbed his pack. “Keep the change, and say hi to your lovely daughter from me.”

“She’s fourteen,” Patricia yelled after him with a laugh. “You stay the hell away from her.”

When he entered the salon, his mom came towards him, holding out her arms.

“The soon-to-be father!”

“The soon-to-be grandmother,” he answered as he gave her a hug. “Or grandmother of two, at least.”

“You look like shit.” She leaned back and took a good look at him. “How about a haircut?”

“Sounds good,” he said and sat down on her chair.

He didn’t even bother to try to tell her what he wanted; she never gave a shit and instead experimented with whatever new hairstyles were up and coming. He didn’t mind, and it always turned out good. Mac never let her do that, but he was a lot more conservative when it came to his hair, which meant he was boring.

Mitch looked at his still-beautiful mom, and her eyes met his through the mirror.

“Uh-oh. I know that look. What’s up, hon’?”

“What?”

“I’m your mother, I’ve seen your facial expressions since the day you were born, and I know them all, so tell me what’s wrong.”

“Actually, Dad suggested I talked to you,” he admitted. “Think it might be a good idea.”

“Did he say something that included the word ‘crazy’?” she smiled. “And is it regarding a woman, because I know he doesn’t know shit about women.”

“Yeah, it’s Anna,” he said with a sigh.

Strangely, he’d always been more comfortable with talking about sex with his mom. It was strange mainly since he’d actually *had* sex in front of his dad, but it was still easier to talk to his mom. Probably because she never looked uncomfortable when he did. She shrugged, gave her honest opinion, but never judged him. She sometimes verbally judged him, calling him an idiot or manwhore or something like it, but never with her eyes. The other reason he liked talking to her was that she most often had great advice.

“What about Anna?” she asked him when he lost track.

“She said she was horny and I...”

“I can imagine what you did,” she chuckled. “In your own horny daze you offered to help her.”

“Yeah. She got pissed.”

“You know, this might be a totally radical idea in the ears of a biker, but have you considered just telling her how you feel? I mean, if she didn’t really care about that, she would’ve let you hump her, because the pregnancy horniness, oh my fucking god! Girl’s gotta be stubborn as hell to not just jump you.”

“Mom! For fuck’s sake! I don’t wanna know that about... oh Jesus!” He didn’t mind talking to her, but he didn’t want her details.

“Well, both you and Mac have pretty little dimples from all the fucking me and your dad did. Quite possibly some brain damage from all the bump—”

“Mom! Please, just get to the point.” He glared at her. “And I don’t have dimples.”

“I know. My point is, what you are feeling for her, is it for the long haul?”

“We’re having a kid.”

“Not what I asked you, honey. What you’re feeling for *Anna*? Is it an itch, or do you think you want to be with her forever?”

“No one knows that!” He knew he was just avoiding the question, and judging by his mom’s glare, she knew it too.

“No one knows if they are going to be together forever, but we know if we would want to be. When I’d been with your dad for a few months, I could feel it in my bones that I wanted to be with until I died. We didn’t turn out to be forever, but I wouldn’t have had kids with him if I didn’t think we were going to be.” When Mitch opened his mouth she hushed him and continued. “You knocked her up and that’s not the same, I know, but if you’re starting something with her now, you need to at least *think* that you’re going to be with her forever.”

He thought about it, but at the same time he knew, he wanted to be with her, and finally he nodded and took his mom’s hand to give her a kiss. “Thank you.”

“One more thing: if you’re thinking about being with her forever, that means just her. If you go into a relationship thinking you can fuck others when you’re bored, it’s doomed.”

“I’m a slut, not an idiot,” he said, and the guy in the chair next to his didn’t have time to hide his surprised laugh.

When Mitch looked at him, the guy pointed at his mom. “Smart woman, I’d listen if I was you.”

“Thanks,” he answered with a sarcastic smile.

“I like you,” his mom said while pointing at the other guy with a pair of scissors and then turned back to Mitch. “Really, tell her! She’s horny and in love with you, and I know you’re crazy about her, so tell her that. And tell her how serious you are about her.”

“I will.”

“So, did you feel her yet, the baby?”

“No.”

“Any other news about her? She’s my first granddaughter, you know. I’m very eager. I saw this really cute princess dress the other day. My granddaughter would love it.”

Mitch sighed. He very clearly saw a future of princess dresses, pink tutus, and fairy wings. No matter what he

thought about it, it was obvious that every other woman even remotely involved in his life was eagerly waiting for the baby girl about to be born into the club family, just so they could buy her all the pink shit they never got to buy to their own kids.

He'd just left the salon when his phone rang. It was Mech.

"The idiot did it. He DoS-ed us. Nothing serious, and the good news is that he used the Low Orbit Ion Cannon to do it."

A DoS—denial-of-service—attack basically meant overloading a server to knock it out. It was annoying more than damaging in most cases. And when it was done with the Low Orbit Ion Cannon, which any idiot could use, it was very easily done. It was also not very hard to track.

"You're shitting me?" Mitch laughed. "We got him?"

"We got him. Give Russ a call. I talked to him and he's already on his way there."

Mitch couldn't believe it. The Low Orbit Ion Cannon was an open source application that anyone could download and use. It wasn't actually illegal to have it, but it was illegal to use. Not many hackers would ever use it, other than as stress testing. Partly because it made the systems unusable, which wasn't what hackers wanted, but also because it was way too easy to track. It had been used in hacktivism a few times to take down sites belonging to people they didn't like, but that was about it. A firewall could often stop it if it was set up properly, but he and Mech had decided to leave their firewall open, and use it as their honeypot; they'd basically opened up for a DoS attack for the very reason that it would be worth catching him no matter what work it might mean later on. They were both tired of the pathetic hacking attempts interrupting their sleep.

Mitch immediately called Russ.

"Fill me in," he said when Russ answered.

"We're closing in. Anything you want us to ask him? Or do you want us to keep him until you get here?"

He thought about it, but he honestly didn't have anything to ask the guy. He knew what he needed to know, Hump was behind it, and he had a fairly good idea about how the hacker had gotten involved. All he wanted was for him to stop; to back the fuck off.

"I don't need to be there, just get the basics. I doubt he'll be able to help us. Hump wouldn't have been stupid enough to keep him close or tell him where he is."

"His daughter might've been stupid."

"That's true. Just get everything we need, and I know you know what that is."

"And then?"

"I trust your judgment about that. You'll know if he's just a geek looking for pussy, or if he might become a problem later."

"I'm good at judging that," Russ chuckled. *"I'll let you know what we do with him and what he says."*

Again, Mitch had no hope that it would lead them to Hump, but he was happy enough about being rid of one stress element in his life, because he was about to blow up. He needed something to go his way, and this was that something.

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It was Friday, and the post-church party was more intense than it had been in quite a while, partly because they'd caught the guy who'd been trying to hack them, but also because Wrench had been voted in as a prospect with Dawg as his sponsor. Mitch was sitting on a couch, looking at the guy with long black hair and slightly crazy blue eyes while he was getting drunk as a skunk and had two half-naked girls around him at all times. Wrench had the smarts to enjoy it—he knew the coming year wouldn't be easy.

Mitch liked Wrench, and he was glad he was in the club, but since the talk with his dad a few days earlier, he'd caught himself looking at the members differently—wondering how they'd fit in if he was the president. He cursed both himself

and his dad every fucking time it happened, because his dad sure as shit knew how to work people.

The hacker, a pimpled guy from a small town in northern Texas, had literally peed his pants when Russ and two of the other nomads had barged into his apartment. Russ had laughed so hard when he told Mitch that, and said he was pretty sure the little shrimp really had told him everything he knew. Hump's daughter had not only lured him with pussy, there had also been some talk about doing the good, heroic thing by taking down the big bad MC club, so the kid had been pretty deflated when he'd realized who he had really been helping. Russ had decided to leave the dude breathing. The idea was that Hump or his daughter might come back, maybe even to kill the guy, and it might be a good way to get the real prize. Mitch wasn't convinced, but thought it was at least a lead, which was about as good a lead as they'd had so far.

They were going to Amsterdam the following week, and he was worried about leaving everyone—Anna—behind while Hump was still out there. He'd brought it up during church, and Brick had suggested that Anna could stay with Mel for the week while they were away. It sounded like a good idea, but there was no way in hell Anna would agree to leave Irina behind if he told her she might be in danger. The sheer panic of it all made it hard for him to breathe. He had no fucking clue how to handle anything that included Anna at the moment, and didn't know how to keep her and Sprout safe.

In general, he had a hard time talking to Anna at all. They'd seen each other a few times since the argument, and it had been slightly weird. Just short meet-ups, and he missed her. He felt like a sucker for admitting it, but he did miss her and everything about her.

His inner monologue was interrupted when Mac fell onto the couch next to him.

“Are you drunk?”

“As fuck!” Mac yelled.

He eyed his brother. It was unusual for Mac to get piss drunk during a Friday night party. Most often he didn't even

stay that long. “Something up?”

“Nah. My wife told me to get drunk as fuck and stay the night at the clubhouse. Apparently I’ve earned it.”

“How many times did you make her come last night?”

“Many. And once again this morning.” Mac’s smile grew wide. “Jealous?”

“I hate you.”

Mac laughed. “Speaking of jealousy and things I’m not jealous of, is it true that you’re going to the ballet?”

“Dad told you?” Mitch sighed, and Mac nodded, still wearing that annoying and silly smile. “Tomorrow.”

“And?” Mac wiggled his eyebrows. “Tell me you got a plan. For once, I think planning might be a good idea.”

“I’m taking her to dinner afterwards,” he admitted. “At a nice place.”

“Oh, admit it, you’re gonna tell her you lurve her.”

“Jesus christ, you are drunk as fuck,” Mitch laughed. “I might have planned that, though... Sort of thought it could be a good opportunity.”

Mac eyed him. “You talked to Mom.”

“Shut up!” He tried to hold back, but finally admitted it with a laugh. “Yeah. I talked to Mom.”

“What are you going to wear?”

Mitch stared at Mac and wondered if aliens had abducted his brother and replaced him with this grinning, drunken idiot. “What the fuck? Are we gay now?”

“No. Just thinking that worn jeans, t-shirt, and a cut or a hoodie might not be the best fucking thing to wear when you’re taking a prima ballerina to the fucking ballet.”

Mitch honestly hadn’t thought about, not for a second, but Mac was right. It wasn’t like taking her to the movies.

“Fuck,” he muttered.

“I got something for you. Stop by tomorrow before you pick her up,” Mac said. “I’ll get you laid, brother. Cross my heart.”

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CHAPTER NINETEEN

Ask Me

-o0o-

I'd spent the day with Lisa, and she'd tried to psyche me up for the ballet. In all honesty, the fact that I was spending the entire night with Mitch was, at the moment, making me way more nervous than the fact that I was going to see a ballet for the first time since my accident. We were going to watch 'Giselle,' a ballet I'd danced, but then I'd danced most of the classical ballets. It was still sort of neutral ground, not like 'Swan Lake' or 'La Bayadère'—my favorites.

I'd mentioned the horniness to Lisa, and to my relief she hadn't suggested I'd just let Mitch take care of it. Instead she'd agreed that Mitch's idea had been good, and she'd taken me to the sex shop. Once again, she'd sent out the guy who was working and told me to grab what I wanted. This time I wasn't embarrassed, and I had grabbed quite a few things. She'd also told me how the worst horniness was a passing thing, and that it would sort out itself. Which had made me very relieved.

Until I open the door and found myself looking at Mitch in a suit.

"Oh!" was the only thing that came out of my mouth.

He wasn't wearing a tie, but he had a vest, and he looked... so god damn amazing it was quite possible I almost came a little. There were at least miniature ripples through my body. Even his hair was perfect, and it looked as if he'd trimmed his beard.

"You like it?" he asked with a laugh. "I've had three texts with penguin jokes from Dad so far. Think I'll fit in?"

"Yeah," I squeezed out when I managed to find my breath again. "You look amazing!"

"Thanks. You look pretty fucking hot yourself."

I wore a black cocktail dress, a pretty simple one, with a red shawl over it, but he seemed to like it. I kept staring at him.

“I honestly didn’t think you owned a suit.”

“I don’t, actually. It’s Mac’s. Must admit I have no fucking idea when he’s used it, but he said I needed to look proper at the ballet.” He put an arm around my waist to get us out to the elevator. “Don’t get used to it.”

“I won’t,” I said with a nod. “But I’m really glad you did it for me. Thank you.”

“I’m taking you out to dinner afterwards, too.” He winked. “And I took Mel’s car. Didn’t think a truck was the right thing for the ballet.”

Mel’s car explained how his dad knew he was wearing a suit. Then there was the dinner, too, and it was... astonishing. I’d half imagined him to just show up in his usual outfit, drag me there, and then drag me home, but he’d really made an effort to make it special for me. I’d been more than happy just that he’d just offered, and later that he’d made good on the offer and was prepared to take me there. This wasn’t just making a ballet bearable; it made it pretty damn great. I was about to tell him how grateful I was when his phone beeped again.

“More penguin jokes?” I asked when he smiled.

“Yup,” Mitch answered after looking at the phone. “And he wonders what we’re going to see.”

“I don’t know how if it will help him, but it’s ‘Giselle.’”

“Do I wanna know what it’s about?” he asked as he started the car.

“Might help you follow the story. Giselle is a peasant girl with a weak heart who loves to dance. She’s in love with a man named Albrecht. But a man named Helarion is in love with her, and he’s suspicious of Albrecht’s noble manners. When a hunting party shows up in the village, it turns out Albrecht is actually a nobleman in disguise, who just pretended to be a peasant in an attempt to win Giselle’s heart.

It's also revealed that he's engaged to Princess Bathilde. When Giselle finds out about his engagement to another woman, she goes mad and dies because of her weak heart. That's Act One."

"Sound exciting. What happens in Act Two?"

I laughed. "She's dead, and Albrecht goes to her grave where she's risen from the dead to become one of the Wilis or a Vili."

"Wilis?" Mitch asked and looked at me. "That's the fairy thingies?"

"I'm impressed. Yes, one of those. How did you know?"

"I read Harry Potter to Eliza when she was a kid. They have something similar with a similar name in them."

"I didn't know that. I haven't read Harry Potter."

"Have you read anything that hasn't been turned into a ballet?" he chuckled.

"Yes I have," I answered and glared at him. "Want to know the rest?"

"Yes, tell me the rest," he laughed.

"When the leader of the Vilis finds out who Albrecht is, she wants to punish him for his betrayal against Giselle by making him dance to death, but Giselle saves him, because she still loves him. It ends with her joining the Vili and when morning breaks, Albrecht collapses in his fiancée's arms."

"The chicks in ballets are very forgiving."

"They are," I agreed. "They also all die, so I'm not sure it's a good thing to be that forgiving."

"No. I'm starting to see why Eliza chose to write her essay on the portrayal of women in classical ballets."

"You know," I said, "I think I'd like to read it. It should be interesting."

"I'll ask her," he said. "She loved the book you gave her, by the way."

He talked more about Eliza on our way to the ballet. Like how she often called him when she couldn't sleep and how they took rides or just hung out, and about a time when they'd been stopped by the police, and some other stories about his family. By the time we arrived, I was laughing, and I realized that he'd told me a lot of it to make me relax.

He took my hand as we walked inside, and every time I squeezed it, he either stroked his thumb over my hand or turned around and smiled.

"I'm not gonna keep asking you if you're okay, so if you want to turn around, you're going to have to tell me."

"I don't," I answered. Hopefully I sounded more sure than I felt. "I want to do this. I *need* to do this."

"Yes, you do," he said with a smile as he opened the door for me. "You're gonna have to take our girl to ballet classes soon."

"She might not want to dance ballet," I objected and then halted and looked around. Everything was just as I remembered it. It even smelled the same.

"She might not, but I'm going to guess that she'll love it just as much as her mom does."

I hardly even noticed that comment because I couldn't stop staring at everything. Even if I wasn't used to seeing it all from the audience, I still had the same feeling in my body as I'd had before a performance. Like every muscle was tense and ready, and I was trying to stop myself from starting to stretch. I was jumpy, and Mitch kept talking, but I wasn't listening. He didn't seem to mind my absent answers to his questions, though.

We went to our seats, good seats, and... how to describe it all once it finally started, the feeling, the music, all of it. I cried, but it wasn't horrible. It was actually quite nice. I missed it, and my heart was aching, but not as bad as I had expected. Mitch helped by asking me questions in a low voice. Some of them were about me, but that didn't bother me at all, and it kept me grounded.

When the first act was over, I stood up and realized I had been squeezing Mitch's hand through the entire thing. I dried my cheeks and smiled at him.

"Think you'll stand another act?"

"Sure," he smiled and put his arm around my shoulders. "Think there'll be any explosions?"

"No," I laughed as we started walking to the bar next to the foyer. "If you're lucky, there might be beer, though."

I took him to the bar and managed to get him a beer.

"What do you think?" I asked.

"It's just as I expected," he answered.

"So that would mean 'horrible,' wouldn't it?"

"No. Just boring," he admitted. "But it's okay. I'll survive, and I like seeing you liking it."

I'm pretty sure I blushed when he said that, and I was very happy when it was time to go back.

The second act was easier, and I started to truly enjoy it. The female lead was good, but the man, who was Victor, an old friend of mine since I had danced in Phoenix, was amazing. I knew that Irina was there simply because she knew I was coming, and she invited us backstage once the show was over, so we went.

Mitch was impressive, really nice, shook everyone's hand, and it wasn't half as uncomfortable as it could've been. I was sure it was strange for him, kind of like it had been for me when I had gone to my first party at the clubhouse, but he was handling it a lot better than I had.

When one of the dancers told me how honored she was to meet me, it got very difficult for me for a second, but then Mitch was there and managed to get me out of the situation with his usual charm. I talked to one of the trainers who had been there since I was in my early teens, and we talked for a while but were interrupted by Victor, who caught me in a long hug.

Victor had been one of the male dancers in my dance class when we were kids. He was just a boy back then, and my clearest memory of him was how jealous he had been when we received our pointe shoes. It was his biggest wish that he'd be allowed a pair, but they weren't for boys. Every year when they came to fit shoes for us girls, he'd begged until they'd let him try a pair. I'd seen him a few times since I'd come back to Arizona, but he was so busy, so it was hard to find time even for a coffee. I understood, though, I'd been the same while I was working.

“You look amazing,” Victor laughed and pointed at my belly. “Very nice.” He turned to Mitch. “And this is the father?”

“Yes,” Mitch answered and wrapped a possessive arm around me. “We need to be on our way, or we'll lose the table,” he said to me.

I looked at Victor. “I'll be back soon, I'll talk to you then.”

“You better, honey,” he answered and leaned forward to give my cheek a kiss. I knew Victor, and I knew he was doing it just to piss Mitch off. “Have a nice dinner.”

I knew what Mitch was doing, too, without a doubt, and it angered me. He was basically whipping his dick out. He might argue that I was having his kid and for some reason belonged to him, but I was pretty damn sure he was having sex with other women, so why shouldn't I be able to do the same? Not that I wanted to have sex with Victor, and even if I did, he was gay and lived with another dancer, but I wasn't about to tell Mitch that. I was perfectly fine with letting him think I intended to screw Victor's brains out. So I moved away from Mitch, and gave Victor's cheek a big kiss.

“I'll call you.” And then I went to find Irina to say goodbye—leaving Mitch behind.

I talked to Irina for a while; it was mostly her making sure I was okay, which I was, apart from being angry with Mitch—again. About ten minutes later, he'd obviously had enough and came to get me.

The dinner was so awkward and strange. We hardly said a word before our meal came. Then I decided I'd had.

"What's your problem?" I asked.

"Are you dating him or something?" he retorted.

"Dating who?"

"Don't even try, you know who I mean."

"No. We're friends. We were in the same dance groups when we were kids."

"Are you having sex?"

"I'm not asking you who you have sex with, so I honestly don't think you have the right to ask me that."

He glared at me, and I could see the muscles in his jaw working even through the beard, so that was probably not good.

"Ask me," he finally snarled.

"Ask you what? Who you're having sex with?"

"Yeah. Ask me."

"No. I'm not going to ask you."

"Why not?"

"Because I DON'T WANT TO KNOW!" I yelled, and the next second I realized that everyone in the fancy restaurant was looking at us.

"Is there a problem here?" the waiter asked when he reached our table at the speed of light. "Miss?"

"No. No problem at all," Mitch said and stood up. He threw a few bills on the table. "We're leaving."

I'd just barely had time to taste the food, which was wonderful, but I didn't want to stay either. I was much too embarrassed after my little outburst.

If I'd thought the beginning of the dinner was awkward, it was nothing compared to what the ride home was like. After about ten minutes of silence, my head drifted off to its own

place, which was a relief. The train of thought wasn't the most relaxing one, but it was better than the furious aura emanating from Mitch.

When I found out I was pregnant and decided it was better to be just friends with Mitch, I'd thought it would make things easier, but it had turned out to be the biggest problem. That was what we argued about, or at least what led to us arguing. It was confusing and it hurt, and I was scared. I felt a bit like a coward, but a part of me was pretty okay with me being a coward if it meant not getting hurt by Mitch. Another part kept telling me that I was hurting now, so what the hell was my problem?

There were other things about him, too. He used to be a pretty carefree guy, but he hadn't been lately, and I didn't know how to ask him what the problem was, because I didn't think it was just about me. I was sure there were other things, too; things that had to do with the club.

It felt like I had been getting to know him better the past month and a half, but at the same time things had continuously become more tense between us, and I didn't know where the boundaries of our relationship—or whatever it was—were. We had a... weird thing that had started out with sex, and I'd been pregnant before we even really knew each other.

If this was partly due to club business, I had no idea what to do. I'd never asked him about it, just the one time I ended up being his alibi, and then I'd shielded myself from it all, thinking it didn't matter.

It did matter now, though, and I hadn't figured out how to deal with that yet. He and a lot of the others were trying to pull me into the family, and quite often 'family' had a slight mafia ring to it. I also had feeling it wasn't *just* because they wanted to make sure I felt like I belonged, that it was somehow to protect me, too. Which, weirdly enough, made me feel more scared. Probably because the mere fact that I needed protection was frightening, so obviously Mom's talk about women paying the price had left some nagging doubts behind.

When Mitch stopped outside my house, I turned towards him.

Looking at him, I felt horrible. He'd made a real effort to make this night special for me, and I'd yelled at him at a restaurant. Sure, he'd been somewhat of a jealous asshole, but I could've just told him the truth—that Victor was gay and I wasn't looking for anyone else. I'd been a drama queen, and I hated when I did that. I sighed.

“I had a good night, you made it good, and I'm sorry that I didn't show it in a better way.”

“Just get out of the fucking car,” he muttered. “I can't fucking deal with this right now.”

“I know I'm not your favorite person right now, but thank you for coming with me.”

His initial response was a dry laugh, and his grip on the steering wheel hardened.

“Anna...” he growled. “Just get out.”

I started to cry, but nodded. “Okay.”

I managed to get inside and into my room before I really started bawling.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Say That Again

-o0o-

Mitch was fuming. He was so fucking pissed he was about to explode. So much for trying to... do whatever the fuck it was he'd been trying to do. It wasn't just her fault, but he'd seen red when that cup-wearing asshole in tights had pushed up on Anna. Mitch had been with her for the full fucking night, watching something excruciatingly boring for her sake, while wearing a fucking suit. He'd even booked them a table at fancy fucking restaurant, and the second that ass talked to her, she'd looked like he'd given her a million bucks.

Mitch pulled out his burner and called Mac.

"Hey?" Mac answered. *"Shouldn't you be seducing the mother of your child right now?"*

"I need to get high as fucking kite, and I need you with me."

"I'm on my way."

That was another reason why he loved his brother. The man was more hung over than he'd been in years, but he didn't even question him. Mitch had told him he needed him, and he was on his way.

By the time Mac arrived, Mitch was already feeling slightly better.

"So," Mac said as he sat down and lit a joint. "What went wrong?"

"I got jealous, she got pissed and started yelling at me at the restaurant, so I took her home."

"Jealous?"

"One of the ballet jerks got all... touchy."

“You know most of them are gay, right?” Mac laughed.
“Maybe not all of them, but I’m pretty sure a lot of them are.”

Mitch actually hadn’t thought about that. “Fuck.”

“Well, the bright side would be that she’s most likely not fucking him now, so go back to her tomorrow and try again.”

“Look at you, finding the silver lining in everything.”

“I know. It’s my superpower. You should also keep in mind that you could’ve knocked up some bitch you hated. Like in a frustrating hate fuck.”

“My hate fucks are strictly anal.”

Mac lost it and started laughing until it ended up coughing.

“That’s probably a good plan,” Mac said when he managed to catch his breath again.

“I’m a smart guy. As long as I’m not trying to tell a woman I love her.”

He hadn’t thought he’d said that out loud, but he had, and he looked at Mac. He’d expected to see a lot of things, but not the big smile Mac was sporting. The honest, and to Mitch’s horror, slightly proud smile. Kind of like the smile his dad had given him a few days earlier when Mitch’d explained why he was taking Anna to the ballet. It had been slightly disturbing on Brick, but it was downright creepy on Mac.

“Maybe you should practice saying that a few more times and then just tell her,” Mac said. “It tends to shut them up, at least the first time you say it.”

“Yeah, ‘cause that’s not gonna make me feel like an idiot, practicing saying ‘I love you’ in front of a mirror.” He took a long drag and held it in for as long as possible before exhaling. “I worry. About her, about going away while Hump is around, and... fucking everything. I don’t think I’ll be able to convince her to stay with Mel, and it feels like I’m going insane about all this shit.”

“I know, man,” Mac mumbled. “I worry, too. Have you even asked her to stay with Mel while we’re away?”

“No. I need to figure out how to convince her before I even try.”

“I’m sending Vi to stay with Mel while we’re away, too. I know Anna likes her, so you could try telling her that. But if she won’t, maybe you should have Wrench staying with Anna?”

He’d thought about it but hadn’t brought it up with Brick. Bucket and his family would be staying with Mel, since he’d volunteered to stay behind, but Wrench was free to stay with Anna if that turned out to be necessary. Mitch just wasn’t sure how to bring that up with her, or how to explain why she needed it.

‘This guy is pissed and thinks it’s my fault he lost his hand, so he might try to kill you.’ He honestly didn’t think saying ‘I love you’ just before or after that would make any difference.

-o0o-

Mac hadn’t left until four in the morning, so when the doorbell rang at ten, Mitch was feeling like shit. He hadn’t really come up with any great ideas regarding Anna, but he still thought he needed to go talk to her, and he needed to do it as soon as possible. It was not a good idea to let the shit from the day before fester, and he almost hoped it was her who had come to have a go at him. It would at least get the discussion started.

But when he opened the door, it wasn’t Anna. It was his favorite detectives, Gordon the Gorilla and Evans the D-cup.

“Do you have a warrant?” he asked. He was in no mood to play games, and he frankly couldn’t have cared less what they had to say.

“Do you have an alibi for last night?”

“Yeah,” he said. “I was at the ballet.”

“Do you think this is a joke?” Gordon the Gorilla asked.

“No, it was actually boring as fuck. I don’t recommend it, but I was there, and I was seen backstage after the show, too. I was also seen arguing with a woman at a restaurant.”

“Anna Dobronravov?” Evans asked with a smile.

“Yeah. Good work on learning the name,” he added.

“Is she here?”

“No. What is this about?”

“Do you know a Patricia Haney?”

His fucking heart stopped. “The woman who owns the shop on Jomax Street?”

“So you do know her?”

This was bad. So fucking bad, because there weren't that many reasons why they'd ask him about Patricia. And if it was Hump—and he was pretty fucking sure it was—this was to spook both him and Brick. Probably a very quick retaliation for the pimped hacker—who they'd fucking left alive! Also, that was the shop across the street from his mom's place. Hump wanted them to know he could get to them. It also made Mitch wonder if they were tailing him and knew he used to shop there. That was a really fucking scary thought.

He realized he hadn't answered the cops' question, and it took him an extra second to remember what they'd asked. If he knew her.

“She's got a shop by my mom's place. I've bought smokes there now and then.”

“She was killed leaving her shop last night, and she had the same number painted on her car as your stripper had,” Evans explained. “But since you have an alibi...”

“Yeah,” Gordon growled. “We'll leave you for now, but we might have some questions later. This still reeks to the high heavens of Marauders, and when we figure out how you're involved, we're coming for you.”

Gordon the Gorilla was probably trying to sound threatening, but Mitch was really fucking fed up with his dick swinging and decided to do the IT equivalent of a rectal exam on Detective Gordon. He was going to find all the fucking dirt he could on him, because he had a feeling that Gordon's affair

with Evans wasn't his biggest problem. It was always good to have dirt like that on a cop.

They had just barely left when Mitch called his dad to explain the situation and to make sure they had a guard on his mom. She'd go crazy, but she was a practical woman, and she'd understand why she needed one.

"Do I need to come in for a meet?" he asked while he was trying to find a clean t-shirt.

"No," Brick answered. *"I'm on top of this for now. Is Anna with you?"*

"No," he muttered. "We had a fight—again. And she's my alibi again. She's gonna love that."

"Wow! You just keep fucking up."

"I think you've already said that. I'll try to get a hold of her."

"I'm sending someone to sit outside her house for now."

"Someone discreet. I don't need more shit from her right now." He scratched his head. "I'm gonna look into one of the cops. I think we could find something to use on him."

"The one banging his partner?"

"Yeah."

"Keep me updated."

Mitch spent the full fucking day on the phone with one person or another. He soon realized that it probably would've been easier if he'd just gone to the clubhouse, but he managed to keep in contact with Mech online; they went through everything and kept in touch the entire day. He also had a quick talk with Sisco, his mom called and yelled at him about pretty much everything she could think of, and then it was the rest of them. He just barely had time to eat, and when he finally got a few moments, he realized what had happened.

Patricia was dead.

He didn't really know her, but she'd been a great woman, and she had a young daughter. He'd been under the impression

that she was raising her all by herself; he'd at least never heard of a man in her life. A fourteen-year-old girl had lost her only family, and it was partly on him. He couldn't deny that, and the weight of it was crushing. There was no way he could make it up to the girl.

When the doorbell rang that night, he just hoped it wasn't the cops again. And it wasn't—it was Anna.

“I think we need to talk,” she started as she passed him and sat down on the stairs leading up to his bedroom. “I'm not really sure where we stand, and I don't think it's a good idea to complicate this even more. And you pissed me off yesterday with your... male chauvinist possessive crap. It's not that I don't want to have sex. I'd probably have sex with anyone. I actually scoped out a guy at the bus, and he was really old—”

“Anna,” he tried to interrupt her, but that just made her angry.

“No! Listen to me. I know you think it's just to... have sex when you're horny, but I don't work like that, and I don't do it that often. Definitely not like I did with you, and look what that led to,” she said and pointed at her belly. “And it wasn't fair of you to just jump me when I said I was horny. Maybe I just wanted to talk about it.”

It was obvious to Mitch that he would never ever, under no circumstances, understand women, or at least not Anna.

“You wanted to talk about being horny?” he asked.

It was the stupidest thing he'd ever heard, and he was too tired to even try to hide how stupid he thought it was. Luckily, Anna seemed to realize how stupid it was, too, because she blushed.

“Okay, that was silly, but still, the point of me telling you this was just so you'd—”

Mitch decided to trust Mac, since his track record with relationships was a lot fucking better than his own. Mac had loved only one woman in his entire life, and had been able to keep her happy for years, so he did what Mac had suggested. He interrupted Anna and just fucking went for it.

“I love you.”

And Mac had been right. Anna’s eyes grew wide, her mouth fell open, and she couldn’t take her eyes off him. Most importantly, she shut the fuck up. He squatted down in front of her.

“I do. This isn’t about sex. I was in love with you before I found out you were pregnant, but I was scared I’d fuck you up completely if I pushed for more right then. But I love you. I see you every fucking day, so this is the closest thing I’ve had to a relationship since I was a teenager, and I miss you when you’re not here, and the only fucking reason we’re fighting all the damn time is that we’re trying to stay friends and not have sex. It’s fucking insane, Anna. I love you, I don’t want to be your friend.”

“What if you get bored?” she whispered.

“You baffle me on a daily basis, so I don’t see that happening, but no matter what, could you please give me a shot at this before you decide I’m a cheating asshole?” He took her hands, and she kept studying him. “This isn’t working. You have to know that, too. We’re driving each other insane like this, and we never fought before.”

She looked at his hands, and looked up at him again. “The cops came by again.”

Well that was a very direct way of changing the subject, but he kind of assumed it was part of the subject, too, in a way. He closed his eyes. “I’m sorry.”

“Did you know her?”

“Yeah. She owned a shop opposite my mom’s hair salon.” He tried to smile. “I’ve never had sex with her, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“Mitch, what’s going on? Can I ask that, or... Like I said, I’m not sure where we stand, what I can ask or what parts of your life aren’t for me.” She gently stroked his beard. He took a deep breath because he had a boner. A slight touch was all it took. “You seem really stressed, and I don’t think it’s just because of me.”

He closed his eyes again, and he wished he could've told her that all parts of his life were for her, that he'd never keep secrets from her, but it wasn't true—and she would know that, too. The best way of doing it was probably to be honest, and be honest about when he was keeping secrets from her, too.

He was having a hard time focusing, though, because her hands on him were just awesome; he'd missed them. He'd been touching her a lot, but she hadn't really touched him since... since before she'd gone to New York.

“It's a really long story, and I'll tell you as much as I can, but you're gonna have to stop touching me.” He tried to stand up, but she pulled him back down. “Anna, please,” he tried to make it sound like a warning, but it was more of a whimper.

“Why?”

He could have sworn she was teasing him. “I haven't had sex in a while. As opposed to what you think, I'm not having sex with others.”

“That's why you wanted me to ask,” she murmured, and he could feel how close she was to him because her warm breath was stroking his face along with her hands. “Mitch.”

“Yeah?”

“I just scoped out a really old dude on the bus.”

He chuckled. “Was he hot?”

“No. Not at all, but he had a penis and that was all I cared about.”

“You always make me feel so special,” he mumbled and leaned closer. “You're not gonna back off and let me tell you anything right now, are you?”

He opened his eyes. She was looking at him and slowly shook her head. She was so insanely beautiful. He reached up and stroked her cheek, and now it was her turn to close her eyes with a deep breath.

“How about I carry you up to bed, Gimp?”

“Say that again,” she smiled.

“How about I carry you up to bed?” he asked, since he wasn’t sure what she meant. That was neither hot nor romantic as far as he could tell, but then he wasn’t the one scoping out random senior citizens.

“No. Call me Gimp. I’ve missed that.” She circled her arms around his neck. “And maybe give me head, I’ve missed that, too.”

His heart swelled, that’s how it actually felt, and he had to laugh. It was as if he either laughed or his fucking chest would explode.

“Want me to suck your clit, *Gimp*?”

“Yes,” she groaned, and her lips crashed against his.

He didn’t have time to register what was happening before her tongue was in his mouth. She tasted just like she always had, and the familiarity of it turned him on more than anything else. This was *his* Anna.

It didn’t seem like a good time to hesitate, so he lifted her up and carried her up the stairs. It was definitely different with the bump between them, but it wasn’t weird; it was even kind of sexy. This was his woman with his baby inside of her.

He laid her down on his bed and pulled off her t-shirt. That threw him off for a second, and he put his hands on her belly.

“Mitch,” she panted. “I don’t mind you being happy about this girl, but you need to get your damn hands off my belly and make me come.”

With a laugh, he tore off his own clothes and went to work on her tights and panties.

“And I thought you were horny before I knocked you up,” he mumbled while getting down on his knees in front of the bed. When he stroked his fingers along her slit, she arched, and she was soaking wet. “Once isn’t gonna be enough, is it?”

“No way,” she groaned. “Please.”

He pushed his fingers inside of her and latched on to her clit at the same time. Her insides immediately gripped him

hard, and she cried out. Holy mother of god, he was pretty sure she had just come. She was not kidding about being horny.

“Mitch! More!”

He kept it up until he was *sure* he’d made her come, and then he couldn’t wait anymore.

“Babe,” he said and got up to get her higher up on the bed. “You’re not the only one who’s horny.” He picked up a condom. “I haven’t gotten around to getting tested and—” he started.

“It’s okay. I get it. We’ll get to that,” she smiled.

He rolled the condom on while kissing her. She arched from the bed the second he was at her opening, and her legs latched around his hips and pulled him in. He was suddenly worried about the baby and tried to hold himself up to avoid crushing her belly, but she didn’t seem to care at all. It was so good. It was Anna, which meant it was the fucking best. He’d missed her—missed this. When he felt her coming, he seemed to get his brain back, and he rolled them both over, getting her on top. That seemed safer. Unfortunately, she was extremely horny, and she wasn’t holding back—at all! She was riding him hard, and eventually he sat up, his arm around her, to try to get her to calm down.

“Babe, you gotta slow down.”

“No!”

“I’m gonna come,” he tried, but she grabbed his cheeks and kissed him. “Fuck!”

“Then come!” she growled.

And he did. Holding a bruising grip on her hips, he came.

Her arms were around his neck, and he hugged her tight just to feel her close while he calmed down. With his hands under her arms, he lifted her off him and gave her bump a kiss. She lay back down on the bed with a contented sigh.

“Better?” he asked as he pulled off the condom.

“A little, but I want more.”

“Of course you do,” he said with a laugh and lay down next to her. “You always want more. Gotta give me a few minutes, though.”

He lay silently next to her, stroking her belly. He felt perfectly calm for the first time in months. There was still a lot of shit he needed to explain, a lot of things going on, but right then, in that moment, things were fucking perfect. He kissed her shoulder, and with a small sigh she turned around.

“So what now?” she asked when she opened her eyes.

“I was thinking we’d keep up like we were, with the addition of sex and making out for a while, maybe you spend some nights here and then... we should probably find someplace to live.”

“Move in together?”

“Yeah. There’s no hurry, but you’re gonna bring every fucking thing you got from the sex shop here—tomorrow—I’ve been dying to find out what you bought.”

She laughed and nodded.

“Lisa said some of the things were good to use with a partner.

“Anything in a sex shop is great to use with a partner if you have some imagination.”

“Bet you have a dirty enough mind for that.” Anna gave him a soft kiss. “Think you can give me a couple of months before we move in together?”

“Absolutely. Think we should do it before the kid is born, though.” He moved her over to her back, stroking her breasts. “After all, I’m the one who knows anything about kids.”

“Maybe you’ll be disgusted when I get fat.”

“Doubt it,” he mumbled and gave her nipple a lick.

“I fart a lot.”

“I fart.”

“And... I hog the cover.”

“I’ll buy you your own cover.” He finally had her on her back and leaned over her, avoiding putting pressure on her belly. “I’m starting to feel like a crazy stalker here, Gimp. You could at least tell me you have a crush on me.”

She laughed and held his cheeks. “I love you. I do and I’m sorry that I... I’m still scared. Really scared.”

“I know. We’ll figure this out along the way. It’ll be bumpy and you’ll be scared and I’ll be pissed, but it’ll turn out fine.” He leaned down and kissed her. “And we’ll have the most beautiful little girl.”

He moved further down and kissed her belly before resting his head on it.

“You should get tested,” she mumbled.

“Oh, I’m gonna. I’ve had sex with you without rubber once, and I fucking missed what was happening.”

She laughed. “I’ve been thinking about that, too!”

He rose up on his hands and hovered over her. “Do you ever say fuck or fucking, Gimp?”

“Sure I do.”

“I’ve never heard you say it.”

“Fuck me,” she smiled and pulled him down on top of her. “I think we should be fucking some more.”

-o0o-

Much later that night, Mitch carefully got out of bed to go find his phone. He’d totally forgotten about everything that was going on, and he wondered how pissed his dad would be about it and how much he’d have to pay in fines for ignoring the club phone.

There were a number of missed calls and texts, he eyed through them, realizing he’d been right about how pissed Brick was—until he got to the last one.

‘Wrench told me Anna’s at your place. Told him to go home. Call when she leaves, and I’ll let him know. Check in tomorrow morning or I’ll kick your door in.’

There were no other messages, and Mitch chuckled. Apparently managing to fuck the mother of your kid gave you a free pass in Brick's book. Mitch sent him a text to let him know she was still there, and that he'd come to the clubhouse the next day around lunch.

He went back to the bed and Anna. She'd rolled herself in the cover, and he had to almost wrestle it from her to be able to get under it, so he decided to get her a cover of her own the very next day.

But when Anna moved closer and threw her leg over him, resting her head on his shoulder, and pressing Sprout against his side, he changed his mind. One cover was pretty fucking nice.

They'd never gotten around to the talking. Anna hadn't been kidding, she was horny as fuck, and he'd lost count of how many times she'd climaxed. He knew he'd had three, but he'd worked pretty damn hard between the fucks too. She'd basically passed out after that. It had been different with that bump between them, and he'd been worried he'd hurt Sprout. Anna didn't seem as concerned as he was, but he was gonna check with Lisa about it. But even so, Anna was going to get a lot bigger, so they had to figure out some good positions. Given how flexible she was, and how she generally liked trying new stuff, he thought it might be fun. He was even looking forward to it.

As he lay there, stroking the side of Sprout, he realized that in a way he was less worried because he knew Anna would stay close. But in another way he was even more worried because he had even more to lose now. He had everything to lose, and it was obvious that Hump was bat shit fucking crazy and didn't care about who he killed anymore. He was so deranged he was prepared to do anything to get back at Mitch. If this thing he was doing now was meant to mess with Mitch's head, he was succeeding, simply because Mitch was a lucky guy and had a lot of people around him that he cared about.

A lot of women.

He pulled Anna closer, and she sighed in her sleep and rubbed her nose on his chest. He was trying to decide what to tell her and what she needed to know. She needed to know more about the club, and most of all he had to somehow convince her that she needed to trust him so he'd be able to keep her and Sprout safe.

He also had to convince her that he could go to Amsterdam and not bang hookers. He had a feeling that could be the really tricky part.

Just before he drifted off to sleep, he made a mental note to thank Mac. He'd been right, saying 'I love you' had shut her up and given him the chance to say what he wanted to say, and she'd listened.

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No More Teasing

-o0o-

When I woke up, it took me a few moments to remember where I was, and then I smiled. But when I turned around, I realized I was alone in bed. That hadn't been the plan. I wanted my massage and morning sex. With a sigh, I started the stretching and massaging and noticed the smell of bacon—and the low music. To my astonishment, it was Bob Dylan. I'd had no idea that Mitch liked him, and I probably never would've guessed that he did, either. He didn't strike me as a guy who liked folk music in any shape or form.

“Mornin’, sleepyhead,” he smiled when he came up the stairs and noticed I was awake. He lay down next to me and started kneading the back of my thigh. “Breakfast is done in about twenty minutes. You done with your stuff by then?”

“Yeah.” I smiled when ‘Girl from the North Country,’ started. “I like this song. A lot of songs on this album are pretty crap, but the last song is my favorite Bob Dylan song.”

“The last?” he asked, and I could see him thinking while he continued rolling my muscles between his hands. “So ‘Tonight I’ll Be Staying Here with You’ is your favorite Bob Dylan song?”

“Yes.”

“You think it’s better than ‘I Want You’?”

“Are you really asking me, or are you giving me subtle messages with the help of song titles?”

“Both,” he answered and gave me a kiss. “You okay enough to continue downstairs?”

“Yes.” I took another kiss. “Thank you.”

“Kinda missed this,” he said as he pulled me out of the bed. “Both the massaging and having you on my back. And

naked in my bed, and on my cock, and—”

“I get it,” I laughed. “You’ve missed me.” I got up on his back, and as he carried me downstairs I kissed his cheek. “I’ve missed it, too, and I’m sorry I was a coward.”

“S’okay, I was kinda petrified, too.” His eyes got wide. “Shit! Don’t move!”

“What?”

“I think... I think I felt her.”

“Against your back?”

“Yeah,” he laughed. “Wonder how many guys can say that the first time they felt their baby it was against their back?”

I pressed my belly more firmly against him, and we stood completely still in the middle of the kitchen. I felt Sprout kick as if she was protesting against the pressure, and Mitch laughed again. He moved me around to his front and put me down on the counter. His hands immediately went to hold my belly.

“Are you big for being in week twenty?” he asked.

“No. Think I’m actually kind of small, but it’s grown quite a lot the last few weeks, and Sprout’s the right size.”

“I don’t remember what Mel looked like, and Vi’s so small everything looks big on her.”

I laughed. “She looked big.” I put my hands over his and pressed them against me more firmly. “Maybe we should have that talk now?”

“Yeah.” But it didn’t look like he wanted to talk about it at all. Then he started anyway, but kept his gaze firmly on Sprout. “A few years back, I caught a guy in the club skimming money from us. He left the club in bad standing, and...” he took a deep breath, as if he was about to jump of a cliff. “He’s back. We think—we’re pretty sure actually—that he’s the one who killed the woman working for us, and yesterday he killed a woman called Patricia. We found his hacker, a guy who’s been helping him, and I think Patricia was retaliation.”

I stared at him, not sure how to ask him about the hacker they'd found, and how killing a woman had been retaliation... He looked at me, probably waiting. Or that was what I thought until he shook his head.

"No, we didn't kill that guy. He's still very much alive. Fuck! I didn't think about what that sounded like."

"But you could've killed him?"

"We *would* have, if he'd actually been a problem or if..."

"I understand."

I actually didn't understand, but I was going to leave it for now. I wasn't sure I could deal with it yet, and instead thought about what he'd said about the guy—Hump.

I knew the internet wasn't the best source of information, but I had still done some searches on biker clubs, so I had an idea of what 'bad standing' meant, but I asked him anyway.

"Bad standing means he's thrown out of the club, he doesn't have any contact with any of you again?"

"Yeah. He's dead to us."

"But that girl, Laura, that was months ago. What has he... I mean, where is he?"

"We don't know. I can't find him."

It sounded as if the fact that *he* couldn't find him was a big thing, and that it meant something. That wasn't what I thought was the important part at that moment, but I was going to get back to it. It was probably firmly linked to what his part in the club was. At the moment I wanted to keep the conversation on Hump, though, since that seemed to be a lot more important to me personally.

"What is he waiting for?"

"I honestly don't know, Anna, but I'm worried." He looked up from Sprout and met my eyes. "I'm leaving next week, I've told you that, and I don't want you to be alone. Can you *please* go and stay with Mel? If you stay there, both Bucket and Wrench will be at the same place to protect all of you."

“The same place?”

“If you’re not there, I’d ask Dad to split them up, so Wrench came and stayed with you.”

“You’d have me stay with Wrench if I don’t go to Mel’s?”

“Yes. I’m not gonna leave you unguarded. That’s just not going to happen. I’d prefer to not go at all, but I have to.” He leaned his forehead to mine. “I just scared you again, didn’t I?”

“Yes,” I admitted. “You did.”

“It’s probably gonna happen again.”

“I know,” I mumbled. “Maybe I should ask Irina to stay with Steve? I’m just not sure how to tell her. Or *what* to tell her.”

“Baby, I’ve been trying to figure out how we’re going to make this work, about me and the club, and what I do in the club. Some of the guys tell their old ladies everything, others nothing.” He sighed. “I guess I’m trying to decide what I should do.”

“I’m your old lady?” I laughed.

“No,” he smiled. “Not yet, but we should probably still decide how to do this. If this had been a normal relationship it wouldn’t matter yet. We’d take it slow and I’d know how to deal with it, but with Hump around and Sprout in the mix...”

“... We need to speed things up,” I continued. “How about you tell me what I *need* to know, or whatever you feel comfortable to talk about? I’m scared, I really am, and I know I’m going to have a problem with some of this, but I’m also not stupid. I know you’re not just guys who like bikes. I grew up in this town, you know.”

“Okay.” He gave me a kiss. “Just don’t get pissed when I come home in a shitty mood and don’t tell you why.”

I nodded. “Maybe not scare me more today?”

“Promise.”

“What’s going on with the breakfast?” I asked, because it felt like I needed to sort things out in my own head for a while. I needed to digest this, and then I’d get back to it.

“It’s almost done. Just some eggs missing.” He left me on the counter, and I continued with my exercises.

“What do you do in the club? Can you tell me that?”

“I’m sort of intel and finance. Or, I help the two guys in charge of that. I’m good with numbers.”

“How good?”

“*Really* good,” he laughed. “I don’t forget numbers and I understand them.”

“I’m gonna test that, you know.”

“Feel free,” he smiled and cracked an egg into the frying pan. “My turn to ask, because I can’t let it go. Are you seriously going to argue that ‘Tonight I’ll Be Staying Here with You’ is the best Bob Dylan song?”

“Absolutely.”

“Sorry, Gimp, that might be your opinion, but it’s not the right one.”

But he picked up the remote control and pressed it, and as soon it started I closed my eyes. I really did love that song. I felt his hands on my thighs and when I looked at him, he was smiling.

“It’s a good song, just not his best.” He leaned forward and gave me a kiss. “Ready for breakfast?”

“Yes. I’m a bit disappointed, though.”

“Yeah? Why?”

“I was looking forward to waking up with you and getting some morning sex.”

“Don’t move. I’ll put on my favorite Bob Dylan song, and then I’ll fuck you here on the countertop. How does that sound?”

“What about breakfast?”

He pulled the pan off the stove.

“I’ll make it a quickie, and then we’ll eat before we continue up to the bedroom.”

“That sounds perfect.”

He disappeared and then I heard the first notes of ‘All Along the Watchtower.’ Mitch didn’t say anything when he came back. He simply ran his hands along my thighs while he kissed me.

It was a good song.

-o0o-

In some ways, being in a relationship with Mitch wasn’t that much different to the time before we started having sex again; he was pretty much the same guy as he’d always been. We talked the way we had before, and he was still fun to be around, despite obviously being really worried about that guy—Hump.

In other ways, it was unlike anything we’d ever been before. He talked about the club a lot more. I understood that there were things he wasn’t telling me, but he seemed relieved that he could talk to me. It was a nice feeling to be there for him as much as he’d been there for me in the past.

He did tell me more about Hump, too, and what had been going on. I didn’t understand much of the hacking stuff, but he said it was just another way to mess with his head and keep him on edge.

What I did understand was that it was a very real risk for me, and how much of a risk had been made clear when the second woman had been murdered. They were keeping tabs on all the women at all times, and from what I understood, most of the women would be staying with Mel while the guys were away, and they’d asked for help from the Nomads, too. Which led me to asking what the Nomads were. I was getting a crash course in biker life, and while it scared me, it also to some degree made me calmer. I wouldn’t be left alone.

Two days after we’d gotten back together, he asked me if I wanted to tag along to his dad’s for dinner. I’d thought it

would be just his family and us two, but there were a lot of people there from the club and also two of Eliza's friends. It was a total of sixteen people, but Mel didn't seem to care at all. Brick obviously loved it, and he seemed genuinely glad to see me there with them. I once again stuck to Violet—she really had the technique down of getting away down.

“I hope it's okay that I'm following you to the quiet corners,” I said.

“Sure,” she smiled. “Just thought I'd get Joshua away from the noise while I feed him.”

“Is it always like this?” I asked and gestured in the general direction of the kitchen.

“Not always, but pretty often. Edie can't really cook, so they often bring their kids here to eat. Mace and Sisco are single and want a home-cooked meal now and then. Mac and Mitch grew up with this, so they like it.” She shrugged. “So they all tend to show up here a few times a week to eat. Also, if they don't show in a week, Brick gets pissed. He likes to have them around. He bought that massive dinner table for a reason.”

“It is massive.”

“Think about it this way, it's easier when there's a lot of people than if it's just five or six. That's when they're really trying to force you into conversations.”

I nodded. It was easy to just sit quietly and listen to the others talking, and it was also quite fun. “I hadn't thought about it that way, but you're right.”

Violet looked at my cane, and when she noticed me noticing, she blushed.

“I just...” she started.

“It's okay,” I shrugged.

“No, I like the flowers on it, and sometimes when I see things, I start drawing in my head,” she explained. “It's really beautiful.”

I looked at the flowers, and then at her. “Like a tattoo?”

“Anything could be a tattoo. You want more?”

“Maybe. I’m quite fond of these flowers.”

She gave me a big, honest smile. “Let me know if you do.”

“I thought you weren’t working. That you’re at home with your little man,” I said and pointed at Joshua.

“Yeah, but I like doing one now and then. I’m trying to get one of the guys to agree to some ink when they get back from Amsterdam. Mac is trying to save some space for later ideas.”

“He’s getting pretty covered.”

“I’ll draw up a few suggestions for you, and then you can let me know what you think.”

We stayed there for a while, and I wasn’t sure how it happened, but I somehow ended up with Joshua in my lap, and I felt really pleased when I managed to get him to fall asleep.

“Look at you,” Mitch said with a smile when he found us.

“He fell asleep. Not sure I need you. This seems pretty easy.”

“I’m gonna remind you about that comment, Gimp,” he chuckled and leaned down to give me a kiss. “Ready to head home?”

“Yes.” I gave Joshua a little kiss and handed him back to Violet. “My place or your place?”

It was meant as a joke, but he took me to my place. While we were in the car, I massaged my leg a little. It had gotten pretty stiff while I was sitting with Joshua in my lap. Probably because I had been terrified I would drop him the entire time.

“Is it getting worse?” Mitch asked when he noticed what I was doing.

“A little. It’s not too bad, though.”

“What did they say about that?”

“It might get really bad.” I took his hand. “You might have to carry me around all the time.”

“Not that I’d mind, but is that true?”

It was worse than it had been, but it was easier to handle the extra pain, since they'd said it was unlikely that it would be permanent. Part of the problem was of course also that I weighed more now than I used to, but hopefully I'd be able to lose most of the extra weight quickly once Sprout was born. At the same time, the pain had a purpose again, so I wasn't as bothered by it.

“Not the carrying around, but it might get pretty bad. I'll be fine, though.”

“Sure you will, Gimp, and I'll carry you around if that's what it takes.”

-o0o-

I woke up the next morning when Mitch started massaging my leg. I tried to pull him in for a kiss, but he wouldn't let me.

“Nah, nah, Gimp. I'm gonna make damn sure you do this every morning and night from now on, just to make sure.”

“So no more sex?”

“Sure, I'll fuck you silly, too, but not until after we've done this.”

One thing I had noticed was that since that first night back together, neither of us had uttered those three little words again. I had a feeling that the reason he hadn't said them again was the same reason I hadn't—it seemed too soon. It wasn't that I didn't love him, but everything was so damn rushed as it was, and I wanted to keep something I could save for a while.

“I'm working late today, think you can pick me up?” I asked.

He'd said he didn't want me to go by bus or just generally wander around alone.

“Yup, give me a call.” He was still kneading my leg, and leaned over to kiss my belly. “And I'm taking your toy box with me today.”

“What if I don't tell you where it is?”

“I'm a pretty sharp guy, Gimp. I think I'll be able to find it.”

He was. That was another thing I'd realized when we started to truly talk about things—he was wicked smart. Not that I'd ever thought he was stupid, but when he went on about computer stuff, numbers, finances, and such, I realized that he was really damn sharp, and that when his dad called him 'genius' it wasn't just a thing he said. I'd asked Mitch about it, but he just shrugged, and when I asked him if he'd ever done an IQ test, he gave me a long speech about why those were so fucking ridiculous and didn't say anything about a person. It made me wonder if he'd had one and had been disappointed, or if it really was what he thought. I was leaning towards the latter.

So finding my toy box wouldn't be that hard for him.

I finished and went into the shower. When I got back out to the kitchen for breakfast, I was surprised to find Irina there. She hadn't been home when we'd arrived the night before. At least I hoped she hadn't. What really shocked me was the discussion the two of them were having.

"You can come by and have a look. There's no hurry." Mitch smiled when he saw me. "At least I don't think there is—we're not gonna move in together yet, are we?"

"Uh, what are you talking about?"

"I was saying that it would be very empty when you leave," Irina explained. "This place is much too big for one person, but I don't want to sell it, either. That's why I stayed for years, but if you two are looking for a place, you could take this, and I can find something else. That way it stays in the family."

"What?"

"Your parents and Irina want it to stay in the family," Mitch explained slowly as if I was an idiot. "That's why Irina has kept the place even when she was living alone. I told her she could have a look at my place."

"So... you'd move here, and she'd take your apartment?"

"Unless it would be strange for you to live in the apartment you were born in," Mitch said with a wink. "I wouldn't mind."

It's a great apartment.”

It was, and it was big with four bedrooms. One of them was a practice room now, and the room next to the master bedroom had been the nursery when I was born. The room I had now had been Irina's then, since it was slightly more private with the door directly out to the hallway, and it had a walk-in closet. I loved the apartment, but I hadn't thought for a second Irina had been thinking about moving from it.

“Why?” I finally asked her.

“It's a good home for a family, but it's just sad for an old spinster,” she smiled. “And there is no way in hell I'm going to live with the two of you. Besides, I'd like a new place, something of my own. I've never truly had that. This was always *the family's* even if I lived here alone.”

I looked at Mitch. “You'd be okay with that?”

“Yeah,” he looked around. “I might wanna fix a few things, but Irina said that would be okay.”

“Can we keep the pictures in the practice room?”

There were loads of old pictures of the people who had lived in the apartment over the years, and I loved it. It was hard for me to look at them now, since I was dancing on most of those pictures, but I didn't want to remove them. The rule had always been that only pictures of a person while they lived in the apartment could go up on that wall.

“She already told me that those had to stay, and that we had to add to them.”

“And you're okay with that? A full wall full of dancers?”

“Yeah. I'll add some cool pictures of me, just to even it out.” He came up and put his hands on my bump. “It's not gonna happen yet, there's no hurry, but it's something worth considering. And it saves me from mowing a fucking lawn.”

“Like you'd mow a lawn. You'd put a prospect on it.”

“Girl is learning,” he said with a kiss.

It was the morning of the day he was leaving, and I'd managed to completely ignore any worries I had about him going. Not so much that he'd cheat, to my own surprise, but that something would happen to him. I didn't know the details, as per usual, but I assumed the trip wasn't just to see the Amsterdam sights.

It had been a great week, and even if I still thought he might eventually get bored with me, I knew for sure I'd never be bored with him. I couldn't keep up with him or his brain! He'd spent twenty minutes trying to explain the theory of relativity for me the night before, and eventually I'd just laughed. I had no idea what he was talking about; the only reason I hadn't flunked physics in high school was because Lisa'd helped me.

I was a bit miffed, though, since I'd woken up in an empty bed, and I'd really been hoping I'd get some before he left, so I went downstairs to find him.

"When are you leaving for the airport?" I asked as I poured myself a cup of coffee.

"In two hours," he mumbled as he leaned against my back and trapped me against the counter. "Did you do your stuff?"

He'd been very firm on that since he'd realized that me being pregnant would make the leg worse.

"Yes."

He held up something in front of me, and it took me a while to recognize it. It was the pink, egg-shaped bullet vibrator Lisa had pushed into my bag the first time I was at the sex shop.

"This was still in the box, with no batteries in the remote. Did you get it on first or the second visit?"

"The first," I admitted.

"I cannot fucking believe you never told me you had one of these."

"I'd honestly forgotten. I've never used it."

“Baby, you will never forget having one of these, and you will use it again,” he whispered. “Now, relax.”

I could hear it starting to vibrate, and I thought he was going to turn me around, but he just pressed his chest harder against my back to keep me in place. His first move really surprised me, because while he kissed down the side of my neck, he gently circled my nipples with it.

“Oh!”

He chuckled and kept kissing me while he played with it all over my breasts. I hadn’t even thought about using it that way. I just barely noticed when he started removing my clothes, and when it finally touched my clit, I moaned out loud.

“Lean your elbows on the counter, Baby,” he said, and I did. “Spread your legs.”

He kept playing with it on and around my clit for a long time. Never holding it too tightly against me, but rather the opposite—as if he was just teasing me. His other hand was stroking my sides, my back, and moved around to tease my nipples.

“Please,” I eventually said. “No more teasing.”

“Okay.” He gave me a light kiss between my shoulder blades, and I thought he’d finally come inside, but instead he pushed the vibrator inside of me. My eyes flew open in shock when it suddenly started to vibrate a lot harder. He was holding his hand over my opening to keep it in there while his thumb gently stroked my clit. “Clench around it to keep it in there.”

I did, and it made me feel the vibrations even more. I dropped my head against the counter.

“Oh shit, Mitch.”

“Good?”

“Yes.”

His hands were all over me, along with his mouth, and he kept whispering in my ear. It took me a while to even register

the words, but I smiled when I did. He was basically just telling me how much he'd miss me, and what parts of me he thought were extra sexy.

Then I felt him prodding against my opening. "You need to be really still, Baby. Don't move against me, just stay still."

He obviously didn't trust that I would, because he kept a firm hand on my neck while he gently pressed inside me. Just the tip, but he groaned when he felt the vibrations from the egg against his glans.

"Oh, fuck, that's good. Don't move, Anna."

It was just shallow, slow movements, but in combination with the vibrations it was still so good, and I rapidly came closer, but I'd always thought the best part of coming was how hard he pounded into me when I did.

"Mitch, please," I groaned. "I want all of you."

"Fuck." He pulled out of me, and took out the vibrator and then thrust into me with full force just as he pressed it against my clit. "Hold the vibrator, babe. Play with it."

I did, and his arm came around my chest to pull me up against him while he played with my nipple. I moved the vibrator further down, just to see how he'd react, and when I held it against his balls, he *growled* into my ear, but I knew he liked it because he slowed down a little to make sure I could keep it there.

"I'm so close," I mumbled.

"Wait." He pulled out of me, turned me around and lifted me up, just to lay me down on the kitchen table and slam into me again. "I wanna see you. Now you can come," he smiled.

And I did.

I just barely managed to open my eyes in time to see him come just after me.

He was resting on his hands above me, panting, and I sat up to give him a kiss.

"Definitely won't forget I have it," I murmured.

He chuckled. “Bet you won’t. Come on, I want one more round before I have to leave.”

He lifted me up and carried me up stairs after making sure I had the bullet vibrator and the remote control with me.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Stoned As Fuck

-o0o-

Amsterdam was *awesome!* That was the only word Mitch could think of, but then he was stoned out of his fucking mind. He was standing next to an equally stoned Mac, and they were staring at the row of slim, high buildings.

Everyone had warned them, starting with Pico and Eagle. Then the president of the Amsterdam charter of the Smiling Ghouls, Daan, had explained that the pot in Holland sometimes contained over twenty percent THC, compared to the around ten they often had in the US. Most of the Marauders had laughed and said they got the good shit from the cartel, and when they arrived at the first coffee shop, they'd asked for the more expensive, stronger stuff.

That entire experience, going into a coffee shop, had been weird. Daan had introduced them to the guy in the shop and told him the Marauders were their guests, and they were welcome to whatever they wanted. But just the absurdness of being handed a fucking weed and hash *menu* had been mind-blowing. It wasn't as if any of them kept their smoking a secret, but sitting at a café, having a coffee while doing it was just... absurd. Then it hit, and he'd stared at Mac, and they'd started laughing like maniacs at the same time.

Eventually he'd turned to Daan and asked him in a low voice, "How can I get this shit to the US for personal use?"

"We'll figure something out," Daan had answered with a laugh.

Bull was sitting opposite him and he'd eaten a space cake twenty minutes earlier, and now he was smiling like a moron. "I love this country."

When Mitch and Mac both got the munchies, they stepped outside, and the first place they saw was a pancake house that

served pancakes with everything sweet a customer could possibly want on them.

“A bridge,” Mac muttered. “Fuck, the canals are a problem. I’m gonna fall into one.”

The thought of that made Mitch giggle and, while trying to calm down, he’d looked up at the house, and that was where they were standing now. Because he was pretty sure it was leaning out towards the street—a lot! And it wasn’t because he was stoned.

All the houses he’d seen so far were narrow as fuck, rarely more than twenty feet, but after having been inside a few, he realized they were usually pretty deep.

He picked up the phone and called Anna.

“Babe, I miss you.”

“Miss you, too.”

“I’m looking at this house, and it’s seriously leaning.” He looked around. “Fuck, almost all of them are leaning.”

“How stoned are you?” she asked with a laugh.

“Stoned as fuck! But honestly, they are.”

“I know they are. Did you call just to tell me that?”

“Yeah, and that I miss you. I’m gonna take you here. It’s beautiful!”

“I know, Mitch. I’ve been there, but I’d like to go with you some day.”

“Why didn’t you tell me that before I left?”

“I just didn’t think about it. I used to travel a lot. It’s in the middle of the night here, honey. Think you can call me later or tomorrow?”

“Yeah. Sorry, baby. Talk to you soon.” He looked at Mac and shook his head with a laugh. “I need to eat.”

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The next day, they were in the Amsterdam Ghouls’ chapel, and Mitch had decided to try to keep the smoking to a

nighttime thing, because the high had lasted for a long time, and he'd been completely lost, but he'd loved it.

When Daan started speaking, he initially turned towards Chucky.

"I'm gonna direct a lot of what I'm saying to the presidents of the border charters. This is not meant as disrespect, but it's a lot of practical issues, and it's their reactions and questions I'm mostly interested in."

Daan's English was very good. In fact, almost everyone in Holland was very good at English. They had an accent, but the grammar and vocabulary was impressive. Mitch'd had no problem with making himself understood anywhere.

"I understand," Chucky said with a nod.

"I'll give you all a quick background first," Daan began. "I know you've done some checking, and my men met most of you when they visited, so you know the basics."

"Yes," Chucky nodded.

"So some of you have already heard what I'll tell you, but I'm gonna do the full thing anyway. Just so nothing is unclear." Daan put out his smoke and took a sip from his beer before he started. "Amsterdam is pretty much the hub for all things smuggled into Europe. It's not just drugs and shit, but *everything*. A lot of electronics, clothes, regular smokes, and even food. And as far as the legal diamond trading goes, Amsterdam is basically what New York is on the other side of the Atlantic. I've talked to Brick and Chucky, and I know they've forwarded the info to the cartel. What we want is uncut diamonds. Amsterdam is known for their long tradition of diamond cutting, so we're gonna keep that part here."

"Probably smart," Brick said. "Adds to the legitimacy of the product if it's been cut here."

"That was our thought, too." He gave Brick an appreciative nod.

"Not that it's our business, but it could be, how are you spreading this through the rest of Europe?"

“The diamonds will be turned legit here, so that’s not a problem. We get them here and sell them. The pot will be moved to our other charters. But that’s not a problem either, as long as we stay within the EU.”

“They told us,” Brick chuckled. “No customs in the EU.”

“No,” Daan smiled. “EU ensures free movement of goods, service, capital, and persons. Keeping us crooks fed since 1993.” He held up his beer in a toast with a smile.

“From what I understand,” Chucky said once the laughter settled, “this will mean we’re muling a lot more than we are now. *Big* quantities. We’ve been talking about adding to our legal businesses, and going into trucks. We’re gonna have to start that up and keep it legit for a while. The law will be all over our ass for the first few months. We’ve been looking into it, and if we start now, it should be okay to go by the time our cooperation is up to full speed.”

“That’s a good plan. We have something similar, and I’ll send you some blue prints of good ways to rebuild trucks and containers with secret compartments.”

Mitch was pretty impressed with the courtesy they were shown. They hadn’t been with these guys for long, but so far he had a much better impression of the Dutch part of the Smiling Ghouls than he’d had with US guys. These guys were in control and very professional. They knew what they were doing and gave a very serious impression. A slightly scary impression, but a serious one nonetheless. This deal was important to them, and they’d made an effort to make it work.

He knew that the main parts of how the deal would work had already been set when Pico and Eagle were in the US, so this was just to finalize the last few things, and also to make sure they all knew each other. The idea was that first shipment would leave the US early in August, three months later, and then a few of the presidents and VPs from the Marauders would fly over and receive the shipment with the Smiling Ghouls, to finally follow them as they moved it. It was a gesture from the Ghouls’ side to show that they trusted them—Mitch liked it.

“I want this to be a close cooperation, not just you handing over your stuff to us. I want us to work together, because we both have experience in different areas. Yours is transport and ours is mainly selling,” Daan explained. “We have similar arrangements with other suppliers, and it has worked well. When we go into business with someone, it’s for the long run. We chose to turn to you, because from what we can see, you do things for the long run as well.”

The Marauders nodded in agreement, because that was how they did business. They rarely made quick deals, and they’d been working with the cartel for almost twenty years. This was a big decision for them, which was why they had been taking it really slow. After meeting the Dutch guys, Mitch was less anxious about it. He was still anxious, but not as much as he had been.

“What we will be demanding is that we, as your biggest customer, are your priority,” Daan continued. “I don’t want to hear that you’ve cut down on a shipment to us to supply someone else. If you have a problem, you give us a call and we talk—we’re not unreasonable—but we need a steady supply.”

“That goes both ways,” Brick answered. “If you’re our biggest customer, you don’t go back on an order. If we get you the goods you want, you pay us. I don’t want to hear about your business being slow because that’s not my problem. But just like you said, give us a call, we’re not unreasonable, either.”

“Good,” Daan said, and he did seem to mean that. It wasn’t a sarcastic ‘good.’

“What I’m wondering is if pot and diamonds are going to be enough, or if you’re going to start adding to that?” Chucky asked. “With very few exceptions, we’ve stuck to those two. It’s for a reason, and we don’t have any interest in anything else. *Or* if you’re really going to need pot in the long run. You have a pretty neat set up here with pot, and you grow it yourself, so why do you need our stuff?”

“Your pot will almost solely be for re-distribution. You have some good strands, but the main bulk is pretty shit compared to our stuff.” He smiled and looked around the table. “After last night, I’m sure you can all agree with me on that. But we have cheap crap in the coffee shops, too. Most of it as the pre-rolled joints we sell to clueless tourists. It’ll get them high, but not much more than that. But we have limited resource and a high demand from the rest of Europe, so that’s why we need more. Since we at the same time were looking for a diamond distributor, it seemed like a good idea to contact you guys. This isn’t about switching distributor, it’s about getting into a new businesses, and we have distributors for the other things we need, so we won’t need it from you.”

That actually did make sense to Mitch. It was one distribution chain to set up instead of two, and probably the main reason why the Marauders had been their choice. It was also an opportunity to get in contact with the cartel; Mitch was pretty sure the Ghouls were interested in selling guns to them. That wasn’t their problem, though, and he was pretty sure it wouldn’t become their problem either.

-o0o-

Three days later, Mitch was still madly in love with Nederwiet and Amsterdam. He’d heard about how things worked in Amsterdam, but he’d still been shocked when he walked into an alley full of display windows and realized there were women in most of them—lightly dressed women.

Bull had immediately gone into one of them, and they hadn’t seen him again that night. Mitch couldn’t blame him; the women were hot. Most of them looked pretty fucking bored, though, and a lot of them were talking on the phone while glaring at the people walking by. It sort of felt like a zoo, but instead of kids looking at monkeys, it was drunk middle-aged men looking at women.

The next day Bull had been eager to go to a few museums, which had highly shocked *everyone*, but it turned out one of the prostitutes had informed him about a couple of sex museums and a torture museum. Eagle had obviously been to all of those, and he went with them. Bull’s only comment was

that Wrench would've loved those places, and they'd had a hard time getting him to move from a display case with the Pear of Anguish. The Torture Museum was a small, cramped museum with narrow hallways, and Bull was pretty much filling it up, stopping others from being able to pass him. Mitch had also been worried that Bull was going to try to steal it.

After two museums, Mac and Mitch left the others and went to a coffee shop instead, and it was just the two of them for the rest of the day. Usually, whenever they went somewhere, Mitch didn't hang out with Mac, simply since Mac didn't drink much and definitely didn't hunt for pussy. But this time Mitch was sort of in the same position, and it was quite nice to hang out. It wasn't as if they didn't usually see each other often, but it had been three days straight with him, and it had been great.

They walked back to the clubhouse. The Smiling Ghouls had offered them bikes, but after the first attempt at riding in Amsterdam, Mitch had thought it best to not try again and definitely not while stoned. The traffic was insane, and the roads about as narrow as the houses.

Their dad was sitting outside the clubhouse and got up to meet them.

"Need you two for a while. Daan gave us a room so we could talk. The others are waiting."

"You could've called," Mitch said.

"Wasn't any hurry. Daan brought some of his hookers and Nederwiet here. No one minded waiting."

"I bet," Mac chuckled.

It took them a while to collect all of them, and Tommy, Mace, and Sisco were zipping up their pants with big grins when they came walking into the room.

"You really picked the wrong time to get back with Swan," Sisco smiled when he sat down. "They got some Class-A hookers."

“Yeah,” Mitch muttered, but he honestly didn’t care. “So what’s up?” he asked Chucky and his dad.

“Brick here told me that you, and some of the others, had some concerns about the relationship between the Europeans and the Americans. The same concerns have been raised in Englewood, and I think it a few of the other charters.” He looked at the two other presidents at the table, and both of them nodded. It was the mother charter and the border clubs who’d been invited, which were the charters the Greenville Marauders worked closest with. “First off I wanna hear what you have to say about this club.”

“They’re good,” Jocko started. He was one of the presidents. “Professional, no bullshit, no unnecessary dick-swinging—I like ‘em.”

“Me, too,” said de Rais, the third and final president, with a nod. “These guys know what they’re doing. Think we should make sure to maintain a good relationship with them, though. I’m not eager to find out what Eagle’ll do to us if we fuck up.”

“This is about the question he had to us yesterday, isn’t it?” Jocko said with a crooked smile.

The presidents had all had an extra meeting the day before, and Mitch’d noticed that they’d looked a bit shaken when they left, but he hadn’t pressed Brick for details.

“He wanted us too look into the possibility of spreading along the West Coast. Or a any straight pipeline that leads us to Portland,” Chucky explained.

“What clubs are working the Washington area?” Mitch asked.

“Smaller clubs, nothing major,” Brick answered. “We met some of few of them at Sturgis two years ago, but there’s no major hitters. Might be some who sell pot, but we’ll just transport through the area, so it shouldn’t be a problem. Think some of them might have good contacts, but nothing we’d have to worry about.”

“Except the Ghouls. They’re all over the West Coast,” Sisco smiled. “God damn!”

That's when it hit Mitch. West coast was in large part owned by the Smiling Ghouls. The Marauders might not be able to go directly along the coast, but as long as they were working with them, it wouldn't be that much of a problem as long as they didn't set up *in* their cities. They'd be able to get established in peace, and set up a working pipeline. What Mitch was wondering was what would happen once they had that shit down, and he had a feeling that would be when the European Smiling Ghouls made their move against the US branch. He looked at his dad.

"What did Daan say?"

"He didn't confirm it, but he didn't deny it either."

"You're doing that thing when you're talking over our head," Mace muttered. "I'm like ten steps behind you two, so can someone who's following them explain to the stupid muscle what they're seeing that I'm not?"

"They're setting us up so they have something working before they're cutting ties with the US Ghouls," Sisco mumbled. "Think the cartel knows about this?"

"Daan's a smart guy. He wouldn't mess with a cartel," Chucky said. "He's aware we're not as big as the Smiling Ghouls in the US, and he's basically telling us to grow until we are."

"He expects us to get involved?" Tommy asked.

"No, not necessarily, but he is expecting us to be able to keep the shipments going while it goes down," Brick answered. "And my guess would be that he's hoping we'd be able to fill in some of the losses with the help of the cartel if that is needed. But like we've established, he's a professional and smart man. I have a feeling he'll make sure all his business arrangements are secured before he makes his move. This isn't gonna happen any time soon."

"Am I the only one who has a bit of a problem with this?" de Rais asked. "He might be professional, but he's obviously a disloyal fucker, too."

"No. I have a problem," Bull answered.

“Loyal and smart doesn’t always go hand in hand,” Brick pointed out. “But I know what you mean. In this case I think it’s a guy, or a part of a club, who’s tired of doing all the job with others getting rich on their hard work.”

“I’m not sure how fucking comfortable I am with going behind the US branch’s back on this,” someone said. “That shit doesn’t feel right at all. I guess it’s gonna have to be us deciding who we’re working with, but I don’t know... I think, in the end, we’re gonna have to make a decision on who’s side we’re on, and I’m not convinced the cartel is gonna stay out of that decision.”

The all nodded. A cartel was not the kind of organization you wanted to fuck with, at least not without some serious backers, and besides the cartel, the Marauders didn’t have any such backers.

“I think we should keep in mind that Daan isn’t trying to keep this from us,” Chucky said. “Which I think speaks in his favor. He’s not trying to fuck us over. He might not have said out loud what he was planning, but I get the feeling that’s because it’s not a set plan yet, just something he’s considering. He’s giving us a possibility to stay on the sidelines or possibly to back out of the entire deal.”

“So that’s the question,” Brick said and looked around the table. “If anyone wants us to back out of the deal because of this. Anyone who has serious second thoughts?”

“I’m more interested what we would do if push comes to shove,” de Rais said. “If they try to break free, would we normally back the US or the European branch, not taking the cartel into account?”

There was a silence around the table, and finally Mitch spoke up.

“I’d back the Europeans. I honestly don’t think the US guys are much without them, and I frankly think they’re dicks. So no matter if I take the personal preference or the business preference into account, I’m landing on the Europeans.”

More nods, and Chucky spoke up. “Anyone objecting?”

No one did, and Mitch assumed that had settled it. He would've been more worried if it seemed like something they didn't generally agree on, but that didn't seem to be the case. Even if de Rais had voiced some concerns, they were just general concerns, and that was pretty much what de Rais always did. He liked playing the Devil's Advocate, and it was good that he did. If he'd truly objected, he would've let them know.

"How much of a problem do you think this might become?" Mac asked Mitch a few hours later.

"Honestly don't know," Mitch admitted. "What I do know is that it might be our best chance to grow into the west without much effort, if that's what we want to."

Mac was silent for a while, and then started giggling. "Has Dad filled you in on his plans yet?"

"What plans?"

"About you and me."

"Taking over the club?" Mitch chuckled. "He told you?"

"Nah, it was Bear. Or... I kind of figured it out when he spent a drunk night telling me about how important the VP is. So I'm guessing those two have been planning for a while."

"It's fucking years off, if it ever happens, I'm not gonna think about it."

"Me neither." Mac smiled. "I wouldn't mind, though. Not if it was you at the head of the table."

"If I ever end up there, it'll be if you're with me. Don't like making decisions when you're not around."

"I'll be there," Mac laughed. "I'm gonna go call Vi."

"Tell her I love her," Mitch yelled after him.

He'd thought about it, but not as much as he'd expected when Brick first brought it up, and he knew for sure he wouldn't do it without Mac—under no fucking circumstances. He hadn't for a second thought Mac would be upset about

their dad's plans even though they were for Mitch as the president instead of himself. That just wasn't his style.

-o0o-

The entire Amsterdam experience had been great, and towards the end of the week, Mitch was sure they'd made the right decision by going into business with them. They hadn't made any promises about adding charters of their own, but Daan didn't seem to mind. He reminded Mitch of Brick in the way he sort of planted seeds and let them grow while waiting at the sidelines. Another reason why he liked him.

He'd talked to Anna at least once a day, and her stay with Mel seemed to have gone well. At least she hadn't complained. Phone sex had been a big no, though. Apparently she didn't want to do that while being a guest at a house full of people. He tried to claim he was a guest in an overfull clubhouse, but it hadn't worked. Every time he hung up, he'd been close to saying 'I love you,' but he hadn't. They also hadn't mentioned Irina's offer to take over the Dobronravov apartment, but Mitch had genuinely liked the idea. He wasn't a house kind of guy, and it was a great apartment. He'd been slightly reluctant until Irina pointed out that it wasn't a shrine. She'd made quite a few changes when Anna's parents moved out, so it would be their place to do with it what they liked, no one would object—as long as they kept the photos in the training room somewhere. He was fine with that; he quite liked those pictures that spanned almost six decades. He also liked the idea of adding his own family to them. There was a lack of bikes in those pics.

To no one's surprise, they were thoroughly searched by Customs when they came back to the US. It took fucking forever, and Mitch was mostly annoyed they'd think they were stupid enough to try to smuggle stuff in that way.

When they were finally released, the first one he saw was Anna. The other women ran up to their guys, but she was walking slowly—or hobbling, as she usually called it—and he met up with her about halfway.

“You okay there, Gimp?”

“Yeah,” she smiled and put her arms around him. “I’m okay.”

He put one arm around her shoulders, and his other hand on Sprout. “And how’s my little girl?”

“She’s good. Kicking away, tap dancing on my bladder, but according to Mel, that’s a good sign.”

“Think so, too,” he agreed. “Missed me?”

“Yes,” Anna whispered.

“Hey,” Brick yelled behind them. “You guys coming to dinner?”

Mitch looked at Anna who shook her head with a meaningful smile. His girl was horny.

“Nah,” Mitch answered without taking his eyes from Anna. “We’re going home.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Again

-o0o-

Since Mitch had come back from Amsterdam, just over a month earlier, we hadn't spent many nights apart. The only time had been when he'd been on a run, but that was just two nights, and he'd called every night. He seemed to think I was worried he'd cheat on me, but I honestly wasn't. I might still be worried he'd one day be bored with me, but I was pretty darn sure that day hadn't come yet, and I didn't think he'd cheat before that happened.

But while things between Mitch and me were great, work was becoming a horror. Or rather, my boss, Richard, was. He'd been great, and had given me a shot despite some severe disadvantages—like the lack of education—and maybe I should just have been grateful for that, but I didn't think I deserved the treatment I was currently receiving. He could at least have been straight with me, but instead he was doing his very best to make every hour at work hell to make sure I quit.

I'd seen the look on his face when I told him I was pregnant, but not much had changed until the last month or so, and now—at twenty-six weeks pregnant and getting pretty big—he was starting to become a serious problem.

His attempts to get rid of me had even affected the people I worked with to the point where they were trying to avoid me, as if my position as the boss's least favorite employee could somehow be contagious. I had loved that theater, and it had felt like a safe place when I was at my worst, but now it was instead the worst part of my life.

Sunday had been supposed to be my much-needed day off, but he'd informed me the day before that I needed to come in for an inventory. I had been stuck in the storage room for a full day, and it was not doing my back or my leg any favors.

When the inventory shift was over, my entire body was aching. The warm June day was making me sweat profusely, and I just wanted to be on my own and mope and curse everything. So I called Mitch.

“Babe!” he answered. *“Where are you?”*

“I’m on my way home. Thought I’d get some alone time, but I’ll call you tomorrow. Is that okay?” I really hoped he wouldn’t ask me why, or just generally ask any questions at all, and I was in luck.

“It’s okay. Just call me tonight, and give Sprout a kiss.”

“Sure.”

We hung up, and just like every time we hung up I got the feeling I should say ‘I love you.’ It might’ve been sensible early on to not say it, but now it was turning into something that frankly felt a bit uncomfortable and weird. We both had a feeling we should be saying it, and we both knew the other was feeling the very same thing. It wasn’t a big thing, though, and it was good, it had just turned into a few comical situations which had ended with us both nodding and mumbling, ‘Yeah.’

I went directly to bed and tried to stretch my aching muscles. I was considering taking a bath, but instead I reached for the Doppler. Lisa’d lent it to me so I could listen to Sprout’s heartbeats. I’d tried it a couple of times but had never managed to hear anything when I used it, and now I really wanted to just hear something that made me calm down.

It turned out to be a mistake, because the fact that I couldn’t hear anything made me even more upset, and around the time I was about to throw it into the wall, the door to my room opened and Mitch was there.

“Knew you were upset!” he said with a triumphant smile. “Wanna tell me what’s wrong?”

He lay down in the bed next to me before I had time to answer.

“I said I wanted some alone time. Why are you here?”

“Because I don’t do phone arguments, and if I pushed you on the phone you would’ve gotten pissed and hung up on me.” He sneaked even closer and gave my cheek a kiss. “This way you can’t hang up on me. Wanna go to the shooting range?”

“No. My entire body hurts and I’m tired.”

“So tell me what’s bugging you.”

“My boss is being a dick,” I mumbled. “I think he’s trying to get me to quit before Sprout is born, and instead of just telling me he’s... I did an inventory today and my entire body hurts.” I tried to swallow back the tears, but it didn’t work, and I moved closer to Mitch. “And I can’t get the Doppler to work.”

“One thing at a time. First let me figure this thing out,” he said and took the Doppler from me. “And while I do that, you tell me more about what your boss is doing.”

“Mitch, don’t worry about it.”

“Let’s make one thing very clear, if someone is fucking with my girl while she’s pregnant, I’m gonna fucking do more than worry about it.” He fiddled with the Doppler for a while and nodded for me to pull up my sweater. “Okay, this can’t be that damn hard.”

“It’s not going to make any difference anyway,” I said and pulled up my sweater. “I should probably just find another job.”

“You definitely should, but I’m still gonna make it really clear to him how I feel about him treating my girl badly.” Suddenly I heard it, the heartbeat. “There! Wasn’t so hard.”

“Wow!”

We lay in silence and listened to Sprout’s heartbeat for a long time, and the steady thumping calmed me down.

“Sounds strong,” I mumbled and moved closer to Mitch

“Sure does,” he said with a smile. “How about a bath to get you relaxed?”

“I was going to, but I don’t have the energy to even do that.”

“I haven’t forgotten your list, so I was thinking skinny dipping is on the agenda for today.”

“Mitch...” I started, but then the idea of taking a swim in a lake hit me. That would be really nice. “Where?”

“I happen to know a place,” he smiled.

“Yeah?” I wasn’t surprised. He seemed to really know places, and he’d taken me to quite a few of them. All great.

“Yeah, and I’ll take you there if you promise to not try this stunt again.”

“I promise. I think I just wanted to mope alone.”

Mitch took the Doppler from my belly and put it on the nightstand before leaning over me.

“No moping alone, Gimp. Besides, we’re gonna live together soon, so you can’t run off.” He gave me a long kiss. “Get a towel, and I’ll get you out to the car. Where does it hurt the most?”

“My back and the leg,” I mumbled and buried my face into the crook of his neck. “You make me feel like an ass when I avoid you, and then you come and are all sweet and nice to me.”

“Yeah,” he chuckled. “Don’t tell anyone how sweet and nice I am. Would totally ruin my rep. Besides, you’re gonna be naked in the water. I’m so gonna get some.”

I had been a bit skeptical, but he really liked me pregnant. I’d even been worried he’d find it disgusting, but that definitely didn’t seem to be the case. If it hadn’t been for the pain, I would’ve been perfectly fine with being pregnant; I still felt beautiful. Violet had warned me that it would change, though. Towards the end, she’d felt like bulldozer, and I had a feeling she was right. All the more reason to take advantage of still feeling quite pretty.

The bump was getting bigger, and it was almost getting to the point where I could see Sprout move, and I could clearly

feel when she had hiccups, which she had often. Doctor Magda had said it was something they could get when they swallowed the fluid too fast, and when I told her how often Sprout had them, she'd told me she'd be gluttonous when she was born.

Mitch came carrying a knapsack and my cane, but he didn't give it to me, instead he put an arm around my waist. "Lean on me."

I couldn't sit on his back even on good days, but with my leg in this shape it definitely wouldn't happen, and I missed piggyback riding on him.

We took the truck, and I had no idea where we were going. I'd realized fairly soon that I'd missed a lot of places just around Greenville when I was younger. There wasn't much I'd seen, and when I'd asked Mitch about it, he'd just laughed and said he'd been riding around days at a time when he finally got his first Harley. He'd been everywhere in the area at least twice, and he had his spots.

A couple of times his phone had woken me up in the middle of the night, and he'd taken off. It was Eliza who couldn't sleep, and he took her out for rides. I'd had no idea he had sleeping problems, and I had never noticed how he sometimes left the bed in the middle of the night to work a couple of hours before he came back and went to sleep. I had, however, asked him what he did if he woke up in the middle of the night when he was at my place, and he'd said he just creepily stared at me when that happened. That's when I'd told him to start bringing his laptop when we were at my place, because the creepy staring felt a little scary.

He turned off the main road and in along a gravel road.

"Tell me you've been here before," I said.

"You need to start trusting me, baby. There's a small lake just up the road here. Not many people know about it." He turned his head and smiled at me. "Don't want anyone to catch us the first time you go skinny dipping."

"Thought that was the point with skinny dipping."

“Nope. Point is to drive each other crazy and then fuck in front of the campfire. Or in your case I think we’ll keep the fucking in the water.” He gave me a huge smile. “Now when we can.”

It took me a while, and then I laughed. Water and condoms didn’t really work, so if he was planning on having sex with me in the lake, it could only mean one thing.

“You did all the tests, and this is just a way to make a big thing out of us having sex without a condom for the first time.”

“Ah-ah,” he pointed at Sprout. “Second time. Although I thought we’d try to take notes on how fucking awesome it is this time.”

“Take it you were clean then?”

“No. Thought I’d fuck you bare and then tell you what meds you need to get rid of my fuck bugs.”

“Asshole,” I said and laughed.

He stopped the car and I noticed the lake. It was really small, but it looked nice.

“I’ll start the campfire while you wrestle your clothes off.”

“Hey, if you want any, you’re gonna have to be nice.”

“I know you, Gimp, you always want some,” he chuckled and jumped out of the truck. I waited and he came over to my side and after opening the door he helped me out. “If you ask nicely, I’ll help you with your clothes.”

“Please.”

“Hmmm, I’m not convinced you meant that.”

I’d been trying to find the perfect moment, but had realized I had no idea what a perfect moment really was, and this seemed like a good time. I’d had a shit day, he’d been a great guy, and he was about to make things even better—so I said it.

“I love you.” Mitch stopped, and turned towards me, pulling me closer, and I put my arms around his neck. “Is that nice enough?”

“Yeah.” His smile was huge, and he squeezed my behind. “That’ll get you whatever the fuck you want.”

I watched him light the fire, and then he came over and started to unbutton my shirt. As soon as it was open, his hands stroked my belly and he smiled.

“Kind of like the idea of having both my girls in front of me.” He leaned forward and gave me a kiss. “I love you, too.”

He helped me with the rest of my clothes, and then started on his own. I couldn’t help smiling when I noticed that he had a pretty impressive hard-on.

“You shouldn’t laugh at a guy’s dick,” he scolded me as he came up to me.

“I’m not laughing, I’m smiling. I like it. Gonna help me out into the water?”

“Yeah.”

He put an arm around my waist we walked towards the lake, and into it. The water was warm, and he’d been right, it took a lot of pressure of my body, and it definitely eased a lot of the pain. I sighed in relief when I was neck-deep in it.

“So, first time skinny dipping,” Mitch smiled. “It’s nice.”

“Yes,” I agreed. It was a very different feeling compared to having a bathing suit. I swam up to him and put my arms around him. “Thank you.”

“Did it help?”

“Yes.”

“Good.” He lifted my legs and wrapped them around him. I could feel his dick resting between my legs. “Try floating.”

“I actually can’t,” I laughed. “I sink like a stone, and it doesn’t matter what I do.”

“How can you swim if you can’t float?”

“I float as long as I move, but I can’t float on my back. I know it sounds strange, but trust me, I really can’t.”

He shook his head with a smile and gave me a kiss.
“Maybe you can now. You got a pretty impressive belly now.”

I sighed, but let go of him to try. Just as expected, I immediately sank. Mitch pulled me up, and he was laughing.

“You really do sink like a stone. That’s insane.”

I tried to rub the water out of my eyes. “I told you!” I latched on to him again. “I’ve never had sex in water.”

“Turn around,” he mumbled.

I did, and he started kneading my back, and he continued until my entire body felt like jelly. Then his hand went down my front and found my clit while he kissed my neck.

“Feeling better?” he asked.

“Much better,” I answered with a moan. “Think you’ve got magic hands.”

“Sure do,” he mumbled, and then I felt his dick between my legs. “Spread a little.”

I tilted my head back to rest on his shoulder, and felt him come inside me. We both took a deep breath and froze up.

“Oh fucking hell,” he muttered, but he didn’t move. “Give me a sec.”

“That’s good,” I said, because it felt amazing. I didn’t know if it was that we were in water, or if it was just that he didn’t have a condom, but it felt amazing. Closer, somehow. “How did we miss this the first time?”

“I have no fucking idea,” he groaned and finally pulled out before gently pressing back inside. “Fuck, Anna. That’s... oh, shit.”

I turned my head, and he gave me a long kiss while he kept moving carefully. His fingers started to play over my clit, but I took his hand.

“Careful,” I smiled against his lips. “I want to last.”

“Okay,” he laughed. “Think I’m just scared I’ll shoot off prematurely, because this is fucking fantastic.”

“Are you in a hurry somewhere?” I asked.

“No?”

“Then we have all night.”

He shook his head. “Got a lot longer than just tonight, babe, ‘cause I ain’t using a condom with you again. Ever.”

I moved forward until he slipped out and then turned around. I held his eyes as I wrapped my legs around him and took him inside again. He was right, it was amazing, and I didn’t ever want to use a condom again. I ran my fingers through his beard and kept holding his almost-black eyes with mine.

“I love you,” I said, and he hugged me as close as my belly would let him.

“Again,” he smiled.

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The fire was still burning, and Mitch was sitting between my legs, massaging the bad leg.

“Why don’t you talk to Irina about a job?” he asked me. “I’ll ask around, too, if you want me to, but hasn’t she already offered you one?”

For the first time since the accident, I’d actually considered it. I honestly thought I’d be able to work at the ballet. I even wanted to, because I was missing it, and I’d have liked to be a part of it even if it wasn’t as a dancer. Lately I’d started missing the ballet in a different way than I had before. It wasn’t the crippling missing, but more of a longing to be part of it again, even if it wasn’t as a dancer. Earlier it had more been that I missed dancing, but now it was other things, more basic things. I even missed the damn smell of the ballet, and the sounds—just the general feeling of being in the middle of it.

“She offered to look into it. Maybe I should ask her again.”

“Think you’d be okay with it?”

“I think so.” I thought about it some more. “Think I’d be more okay with it if you went with me to the ballet again.”

He laughed. “Think that’s the kind of thing you do for people when you love them.”

“I’ll come with you to some bike convention or something,” I offered, and he laughed again.

“I’ll hold you to that.” He leaned down and gave Sprout a kiss. “How’s the leg now?”

“A lot better. Thank you.” I pulled him down next to me. “I feel a lot better in general. Thank you for ignoring what I said.”

“Oh, Gimp, I’m so gonna remind you about that,” he laughed. “Wanna stay here for a while longer?”

“Yeah. I do,” I said. He pulled a blanket over us and held me tight. “Promise me we’ll do this again, soon.”

“All you have to do is ask, Gimp. I’ll take you skinny dipping every fucking night if you want to.”

-o0o-

He woke me up before the sun came up, and we had sex again. It truly was different, and he loved it as much as I did.

He dropped me off at home, since he was going directly to work, and I found Irina in the kitchen.

“Hey,” she said, and looked surprised. “Why are you coming home now?”

“We spent the night outside, and he was going to work.” I sat down in front of her. “Listen, my boss is becoming something of a problem, and I was wondering if you could maybe look into something at the ballet. Anything really. Or... anything you think I could do.”

Her smile became impossibly big. “I’d love to. I don’t know of anything right now, but I’ll let them know you’re interested.”

“I don’t really have any qualifications.”

“Honey, you know as well as I do that you’re qualified for a lot of the jobs there simply for having been a dancer. There are some things only dancers understand.”

She was right about that, but I highly doubted I'd be able to train anyone, but I still hoped it would work out somehow, because the more I thought about it, the more I wanted back.

"I talked to Mitch the other day about moving," Irina continued.

"Oh... And?"

"He said it was pretty much up to you, but we also said that we'd look into doing it in about a month."

"So how does that mean it's up to me?" I asked. "Sounds like you've already decided."

"We kind of did," she admitted. "But you need to get this place ready before Sprout arrives. You don't want to be in the middle of renovations when she's born."

"Okay. I think we should do it in about a month." Since that was what they'd obviously already decided, I might as well go with it.

"Good." Irina stood up. "I need to get to work, and it looks like you need some sleep."

I did, and after a cup of tea I went to my room. Which I assumed wouldn't be my room for much longer. I wasn't angry, I knew I had a tendency to push things ahead of me, and I'd been worried about setting a date. It seemed so definitive, which, in all honesty, was the point. We needed to decide and get things done. Mitch and Irina were the same in that aspect, and I didn't even want to know how much planning they did over my head, because I had a feeling it was quite a lot—at least when it came to the moving. I did pick up my phone to call Mitch, though.

"Miss me already?"

"No. Just calling to let you know I'm on to you and Irina. You're making plans without me."

He just laughed. *"Yeah, but I know you're perfectly comfortable telling me to go to hell if I step over the line."*

"I am, but I think about a month is a good thing. And she's looking into a job for me, too."

“Great. Let me know what she says. I’m going to have a word with your boss, though, and don’t even try to stop me.”

“I’m gonna try, but I have a feeling it won’t matter. Just keep in mind it might just get worse.”

“It really won’t. I can guarantee it won’t. Get some sleep, baby.”

“Talk to you later.”

“Yup. My place tonight. I wanna test sex without a condom in a bed. I think it might be good.”

“I’m sure it’ll be good.”

“Shit. Gotta go. Love you.”

He hung up before I had time to answer, which was just as good because his ‘love you’ threw me off a little. It wasn’t that I didn’t like it, but it felt a little strange. Like we’d gotten to the point where we said ‘love you’ instead of ‘goodbye’ really fast. But then we’d done everything fast, and I just hoped we weren’t going *too* fast. It didn’t feel like we were, but I was still worried. I seemed to be the only one worrying, though. Everyone else seemed to think it was all good, so maybe I should just go with that, too.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Take Me Home

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“Think Vi could do a wall painting at the new place?” Mitch asked Mac. “We’re starting the repainting next week, and Anna said one or two wall paintings would be okay.”

“Sure.”

“We can pay her.”

“Don’t think she’ll accept the money, but you can ask her. Did you decide on the other colors?” Mac asked.

“Sorry to interrupt,” Brick said, “but would you like some cranberry juice to go with that discussion?”

Mitch and Mac closed their mouth and shook their heads in unison.

“Good,” Brick continued. “Since we’re done with the pussy talk, maybe we can get this meeting going? There are some things we need to go through. The first shipment is going out from New York on August 12th. Bear and I are leaving for Amsterdam a week later.” He looked at Mitch. “Means I’m missing your birthday, but I think you’ll survive.”

“I’m pretty sure I will,” he agreed.

More than anything, he was glad he didn’t have to go with them, since they were closing in on Sprout’s due date by then. That in combination with him still being really worried about Hump mean he didn’t want to leave Greenville unless absolutely necessary. Since Patricia’s murder, Hump was gone again. No sign of him what so ever, but then the only signs of him had been when he popped out to kill someone, so Mitch wasn’t that surprised about it anymore. It still haunted him, but he wasn’t surprised.

Either way, he didn’t want to leave Anna behind. He knew she had protection at all times, but he still felt a need to be the

one who kept an eye on her. It might just be that he still was at the stage where he wanted to be close to her all the fucking time.

“How often do you think they’ll want someone from us to go over there?” Sisco asked.

“Don’t think they’ll make any demands,” Bear answered. “Us going there this time was more of an invite to show us their routes and shit like that, but I’d say we still should go now and then, as a sign of good faith. But I’m guessing most of you wouldn’t mind going pretty fucking often anyway, so that shouldn’t be a problem.”

“No we wouldn’t,” Bull said with a scary smile. “But everything is go, then? Cartel got their shit down, too?”

“Yeah. They’re really eager,” Brick answered. “And I always get worried when they’re eager. I’m just hoping it’s not going to end up being our problem.”

“That what ends up being our problem?” Tommy asked.

“Not sure, yet, to be honest. Might just be that I’m on edge. We’ll cross that bridge when we get there.”

Mitch was fairly sure Brick had a plan for that bridge, and any other bridge they might bump into, but he had questions that were a bit more imminent problems.

“What’s happening with the trucks?” Mitch asked.

Once the cargo was over the border, it would be packed and hidden in containers, ready for shipping, and they needed trucks to transport it. In general, Mitch liked the layout, since it meant the stuff was packed by the cartel and was never repacked or changed anywhere along the road by the Marauders. One of the Marauders would be there for the packing of the containers, to oversee the work and to be able to see what was in the shipments. None of this was because they necessarily thought that anyone was trying to trick them, but simply a way to make sure everyone felt comfortable with the arrangements.

“Our own trucks are still running clean, but the US Ghouls have found a few,” Brick said and looked at Mitch and Mech.

“Now, those fuckers I don’t trust any further than I can throw them, and they’re a bunch of fat fuckers, so I want you two to check those trucks. See where they come from. Which leads us to the next thing I wanted to bring up—The US Ghouls.”

There was a collective sigh around the table.

“What about them?” Mace wondered with a crooked smile.

“We need to start looking at what friends we have between any of our border crossings and Portland. I’ll talk to Russ. I know he’s got a lot of contacts out west, and I’m sure some of the other Nomads have, too. They ride that stretch pretty often.” Brick sighed. “I know some of you don’t like the idea of what we’re doing here,” he was looking at Bull when he said it, but Mitch knew that Mace didn’t like it either, “but I’m actually more worried about the state of the US Ghouls and what working with them would really mean.”

“I might not like it, but I see what you’re seeing,” Bull said with a nod. “I’ll follow you lead, and I’ll do it without reservations.”

Mitch hadn’t thought anything else. Bull was crazy as fuck, but completely loyal, especially to Brick.

“Any input from Russ on this?” Bear asked.

“I didn’t fill him in. He’ll be here before the shipment. I’ll talk to him then.”

“Did he have anything on Hump?” Mitch asked.

Brick shook his head. “Sorry, kid.”

Mitch hadn’t expected it, but he still felt like shit. It also seemed like it was the only thing he could think about. Luckily, he wasn’t that important to the Dutch operation at the moment, and they all understood. No one blamed him.

“I got a something I just want to bring up quickly,” Dawg said. He was usually a pretty quiet guy at meetings, simply since he didn’t have an area of expertise other than being a really fucking good soldier, and that he knew pretty much everyone in the club, since his dad had been an original member and the first Marauder president. “It’s just regarding

Wrench. I don't know about you guys, but I think he's doing really well."

All of them, and Bull especially, nodded. Bull wasn't an easy guy to impress, but Wrench was the kind of guy he liked—borderline psycho—and Mitch had a hunch Bull felt he'd missed an opportunity when he didn't step up and took Wrench on as his prospect.

"You think he's ready for runs?" Brick smiled.

"I think he is," Dawg confirmed. "I also happen to know he's licensed to drive trucks, so I think we should make use of him, because I don't think there's anyone of us who really questions that he'll make his prospecting period. And you all know I don't say that lightly."

"No you don't," Brick nodded. "You're usually really fucking tough on them. Alright, anyone oppose Wrench working runs?"

There was a unison 'no' around the table, and just like that, Wrench was in on the runs.

When they left the chapel, Mitch was surprised to see Anna by the bar, and she didn't look happy.

"Hey, Gimp. What are you doing here?"

"Your goon wouldn't drop me off at your place since I'd be alone there," she muttered and pointed at Wrench who just shrugged. He didn't look apologetic at all. Not that Mitch had expected him to; Wrench did what he was told. "I told him that he better just take me here then. I honestly didn't think he would."

Mitch laughed and looked at Wrench again and gave him a nod as thanks. Initially, the sweetbutts had thought Wrench was 'the cutest ever,' but these days they held a healthy fear of him. He wasn't the kind of guy who hurt them or was into all that freaky stuff, there was just an unnerving air around him that they didn't like. Mitch kind of understood what they meant. Wrench constantly looked like he at any moment might pull out a knife and slit your throat.

“Thanks, man,” he said to Wrench who gave him another shrug and a nod. Mitch put an arm around Anna. “Wanna stay here for the night?”

She turned around and looked at the party starting around them. “No. Definitely not.”

He chuckled and leaned closer. “What have we learned today?”

“What?” she asked.

“The prospects are always gonna be more scared of me than of you, so follow their lead.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” She gave him a kiss. “Take me home.”

The prospect of getting her naked into his bed in less than twenty minutes made him hurry up. He might’ve thought sex with her was good, but fucking her bare was beyond anything, and she was still so fucking horny. The big belly meant some positions was out of the question, but there was still plenty to chose from—all of them awesome.

-o0o-

A few days later, they were at Mac’s place to celebrate his 29th birthday. Anna soon sneaked away to some corner with Vi, but Mitch quite liked it. It meant a lot to him that Anna was close to his brother’s wife, because he liked being close to Mac, and if Anna liked Vi that was so much easier.

“Your girlfriend just offered Mel ballet tickets,” Brick muttered and pulled Mitch towards the backdoor. “I need a smoke.”

“You think she’s gonna ask you to go with her?” Mitch laughed.

“I think my wife knows me better than that.”

“I’m only speculating here, but I know Mel is big on lace lingerie—“ he didn’t get to finish, though.

“How the fuck do you know that?”

“Come on, Dad. Everyone knows that. Also, she brings Eliza to the shops.”

“What’s your point?”

“I think she’ll be capable of persuading you to go if she made an effort.” He smiled as he lit his smoke and gave his dad the lighter. “I could say something encouraging about how it’s not so bad and pretty good, but it would mean I’m lying to my dad, and I don’t lie to my dad.”

“That bad?”

“Yup.”

They sat down and kept quiet for a while, but Brick soon started to giggle.

“Imagine the hours of ballet you’re gonna have to watch when your girl is born.”

“Yeah. I know.”

“You know you’re gonna carry her tutu.”

“Not gonna happen, and if it does, it won’t be in front of you or any of the other guys.”

“I bet you a hundred bucks I’m gonna catch you carrying a pink tutu.”

Mitch knew he sooner or later would be carrying Sprout’s tutu, regardless of its color, but he was gonna make damn sure no one from the club caught him doing it. It was a matter of principle, so he was willing to take that bet.

“Deal,” he muttered, and they shook hands. “On the other hand. It’s you grandkid. You’re gonna have to watch her dance, too, so you might as well follow Mel to the ballet.”

“I’m not going to the ballet. I have balls, so I’m not doing that. If my granddaughter’s in a ballet, that’s one thing, but watching a bunch of faggots in tights tossing skinny women into the air—not doing that.”

Brick was a stubborn bastard at times, so Mitch knew it would be tough for Mel to convince him, but she knew her husband and probably knew exactly where all his buttons were.

She'd be able to convince him if she made an effort. He was pretty sure a part of the deal would be that no one found out, though, and there was no doubt in his mind that Brick would hate every second of it.

“How are you holding up, kid?” Brick suddenly asked.

“I don't know,” he admitted. “It's getting to me.”

“Just keep in mind that that's what he wants. I get that it's hard for you, but we're gonna make sure nothing happens to Anna.”

“I slightly less smart person would probably believe you, but I know that anything can happen.”

“You can't think like that. It'll drive you nuts.”

“That's kind of what's happening, Dad.” He shook his head. “I just don't get why we can't find any traces of him, and I know he has to be close. He can't be that far away, because he's keeping an eye on us somehow.”

Mitch had gone through everything he could think of. He'd done searches on everyone even remotely connected to the club, and he'd done it more than once. There was nothing there, nothing to find, and he knew it, but he still couldn't stop checking. He needed to keep making sure because it would kill him if he realized later on that it was something he should've noticed—that he'd missed something—and that Anna or someone else he cared about was hurt because of it.

“Everyone in the entire club is on this. We'll find him.”

Mitch would feel slightly more confident if it hadn't been for the fact that everyone in the club had been on it for over six months, but he didn't mention that. He just nodded.

-o0o-

Later that night, he was in his bed holding the sleeping Anna close to him. He stroked her side and moved further down to rest his hand on Sprout. These days he could feel her all the time. Whenever Anna settled down and stayed still, Sprout woke up and started kicking, and she had hiccups all the time. It drove Anna insane, because apparently it felt just

as if she was having them herself, and there was nothing she could do about it. He loved the hiccups, but he'd made sure to not say that to Anna. It was nice to lie next to his girl and feel his baby girl jump inside of her. There was just something so humane with hiccups, and if fascinated him that Anna had a person inside of her who had them.

But for once, both Sprout and Anna were still, and he couldn't sleep. Even if he'd never been much of a sleeper it had been worse than usual lately. Every time he closed his eyes, he got the most horrifying visions of Anna dead with the numbers of the golden ratio scribbled on Sprout in her own blood. He couldn't get rid of those visions short of lying next to her and staring at her, watching her breathe.

He turned to his back with a sigh and looked at the boxes that were stacked in the corner. He'd started packing, and it was a strange, but decidedly good, feeling. The apartment had been the one he moved to when he left home, and now he was moving to Anna's family-home. He was surprised by how comfortable he was with the idea, but it was a great apartment, and he knew they could make it their own. Or at least that he could. Anna didn't seem particularly interested in any of it, but she'd protested about the things she didn't like at least. Apparently how she lived wasn't much of an issue to her the way it was to him, but she was okay with him making big changes, so she wasn't sentimental about it.

"Are you sighing loudly so I'll wake up?" Anna mumbled next to him, and the next second she turned around to look at him. "Wanna talk about it?"

"Nah. I'm good. Go back to sleep."

"Having second thoughts?"

"What?"

"About us moving in together?"

He shook his head and hugged her. "No. This isn't about that at all. I was actually just thinking that I liked the idea of your place becoming our place."

"And liking it made you sigh?"

“We both know you’re the one who’s worried,” he smiled and it turned into a laugh when she hid her face against him. “Gonna bail on me?”

“No,” she groaned into his chest and then looked at him with a pretty impressive sigh of her own. “Think I’m still not convinced you won’t bail on me, though.”

“Why would I do that?”

“You’re easily bored, and I’m pretty boring.”

He laughed again and dipped his head for a kiss. He really wished there was some way to explain to her that she wasn’t boring, not even close to boring, and how fucking unlikely it was that he’d ever get enough of her. But there wasn’t a god way, so instead he turned it around on her.

“Do you think I’m boring?”

“No.”

“Why not?” He watched her freeze up, and he could see how she was struggling to answer. He interrupted her train of thoughts with a kiss on her nose. “It’s not that easy, is it? Some things you just know or feel, but I’ll try to explain anyway.”

“Please do,” she smiled.

“At the surface, we’re very different. Your life hasn’t been anything like mine, and we don’t have the same values on some subjects that people are very opinionated about.”

“Are we on death penalty again?”

“Maybe,” he chuckled.

That had been one of the more heated breakfast discussions, and she’d managed to call him a hypocrite six times within a minute during it. She was for death penalty, and had choked on her coffee when he said he wasn’t. And when she managed to stop dancing around the subject about him being an outlaw, she’d asked him if he was against the club killing people the deemed necessary to die. He’d admitted that he didn’t have a problem with that at all, but he did have a major problem with governments killing their citizens—which was absolutely true.

He'd tried to explain his view about how laws as weapons, and weapons in the hands of men who rarely knew how to use them, or for that matter paid much attention to how powerful they were. The flaw in laws and punishment were never the written texts, it was that those texts were interpreted and handled by humans, who disturbingly often had reached their position with the help of money from companies who had an interest in controlling the laws—who definitely understood the concept of laws as weapons. Considering the flaws built into lawmaking and the idea of how to use them, something as final as capital punishment shouldn't be allowed to exist. Especially in combination with federal prosecutor and agents who seemed to quite often *make* cases as a matter of pride. The US had a brutal justice system, which had lead to the highest rate of incarceration in the world. It was basically running it's machinery on fear and anger, which in turn meant incarceration was used to solve problems that historically wasn't even seen as *criminal* problems. Add the use of capital punishment in a justice system that worked in that way—that was fucking scary.

As for the club, they weren't a government, and he didn't see it as the same problems if they fucked up and killed the wrong person, because as opposed to the government, they'd pay for it.

He'd thought he'd made a great case when he said those things, and she'd listened silently, so he thought he'd convincer her. Which he hadn't, and that was the first time he'd realized how she discussed things. As opposed to most people he'd met, she actually listened instead of just waiting for her turn to speak. Then she told him what arguments she didn't buy, and how she thought he was wrong. He'd fucking loved it!

So it might be just one example of how they were fundamentally different when it came to their opinions and political views, which he knew was one of the things she sometimes worried he'd grow tired of, but instead he thought it was exciting.

“It doesn’t bother me that we have different opinions,” he said to her and gave her a squeeze, “because the most important thing is that we have them. Even if we don’t agree, you have them, and you like discussing them. That’s really all I care about.” He could see her skepticism. “And I like it. You might come off as careful and shy, but you can really bring it in an argument, and you pay attention.”

“You like that?”

“Totally turns me on. So it would be way more boring if we had the same opinion about everything.”

“Okay. Then what do you mean by we’re just different on the surface?”

“Our core things are the same. Like the importance of family and loyalty, and you definitely understand commitment. Amazingly enough, you’re one of the most committed people I’ve ever met, and I’ve met some seriously committed people, but it’s just as natural as breathing in your family.”

“Commitment to dance,” she pointed out.

“It doesn’t really matter where you’ve directed it, you have it in you, and not every one does.” He put his hands on her belly. “And I have a hunch were you’ll direct it next. She’s a lucky kid.”

Anna’s eyes were shiny, and she swallowed heavily. “You always do that.”

“Do what?”

“Show me how who I was could be more.”

“Because it wasn’t who you *were*, babe, it’s who you *are*. You think those amazing things about you disappeared just because you can’t dance, but that’s just one way of expressing yourself. You’re still just as vibrant and colorful, and I see that. So I won’t ever be bored.”

She was crying, and with a sob she put her arms around his neck and hugged him tight. “I love you.”

“I love you, too, Gimp, so don’t worry so much. I’m not gonna bail on you or Sprout.”

“I never thought you’d bail on her,” Anna laughed through her tears. She took a few deep breaths and wiped her eyes. “Wanna talk about why you’re sighing now?”

He actually didn’t, but figured it might be best. If for no other reason that it would assure her it wasn’t about her, at least not in the way she thought, but he also thought it might help.

“It’s about that guy. I’m... I’m worried and I don’t know how to keep you safe, and it scares me.”

“So I shouldn’t get upset when your friends push me around?”

“It would really help me if you didn’t.” She looked worried. “See. A lot bigger risk that you decide you’ve had enough of this and leave me than the other way around.”

Anna shook her head. “No, that commitment thing stops me from doing that,” she smiled. “But I’m not gonna lie and say it doesn’t scare me.”

“No. Never lie about that. I want to know so we can talk about it.”

“How can I help you?” she asked and gave his chin a kiss. “Want me to talk about something?”

She did that sometimes, and it was surprisingly helpful. It was usually him talking to people to keep his mind off things, or his brain rambling random facts about anything to him, but he’d discovered that listening to Anna talking had a strangely calming effect on him. He hadn’t even noticed it at first, but later realized that times like when she’d talked about her shoes were moments he’d been perfectly calm. He’d mentioned it to her, and now she sometimes offered to talk to him to get him calm. He’d thought it might be slightly insulting to her that he fell asleep while she was talking to him, but she understood.

“Yes,” he said and tried to pull her closer, but Sprout tended to be in the way these days. “Turn around.”

She did, and he tucked her closer with his hand on the belly and rested his chin on the top of her head.

“Talk to me,” he mumbled when he was comfortable, and she did. She talked about Russia and the ballet after the revolution. How it had been for her mother and the Russian part of the family, and he soon fell asleep.

-o0o-

Two days later, he, Mac, Bull, and Wrench were waiting outside the theater where Anna was still working. It was her day off, and he hadn't told her where he was going, since she'd try to stop him, but he was really fucking fed up with her asshole of a boss making her body ache more than it had to. He would've wanted to do this weeks ago when she'd first mentioned it, that night when they were skinny dipping, but she'd convinced him to let it go, that she was quitting soon anyway. Unfortunately, nothing had turned up at the ballet, and finding a job while pregnant wasn't the easiest thing even under the best of circumstances—which Anna didn't have.

They'd been to the lake for more swims quite a few nights after the first time, and he knew it was one of few times when her body didn't hurt, but he was mostly pissed that her asshole boss made things so much worse for her. He was also slightly pissed that she didn't tell him about it—not that she had to; it was still hard to miss. He'd suggested she'd quit even if she didn't have another job, he had money, but that had led to the worst argument since they started fucking again. Apparently that wasn't an option.

“So, just so I get this right—no blood?” Wrench asked.

“No. Just scare him a little,” Mitch confirmed.

“Oh.” Wrench sounded disappointed.

“She's gonna quit soon anyway.” One way or another, he thought to himself. “I just want him to make sure her remaining time here runs smoothly. Or I'll simply make sure that any pain he causes her ends up on his own legs and back.”

Bull snorted. “Remind me again why we don't just kill the dude?”

“She'd get pissed, but that's actually the only reason.”

“We could make him disappear,” Wrench suggested.

Mitch had considered the same thing, but had decided against it, and not because he didn't think the asshole deserved it, but because he didn't want something happening that close to her yet. Not with all the other things that were going on. He was still very tempted to take out all of his frustrations on her boss, though.

"If this doesn't help, that's what we'll do," Mitch decided.

"Is that him?" Mac suddenly said and pointed towards the doors.

"That's him," Mitch confirmed. They walked up to him, and Bull put a hand on his shoulder, leading him in the direction of an alley.

"What are you doing?" he asked with big eyes.

"We're gonna have a little chat about one of your employees and how you treat her," Mitch smiled. "Because your actions are affecting my sex life, and that upsets me."

"He likes sex," Bull chuckled. "But then again, who doesn't. And I find that lack of sex makes me... pesky."

"What? Who?"

"Anna," Mitch said with a big smile once they'd reached the end of the alley. The horrified expression on the guy's face made it very clear to Mitch that he knew exactly what they were talking about, but he'd had no idea Anna was seeing a biker. "She's my girlfriend. I'm gonna take a wild guess and say she hasn't told you about me or what I do."

"N-n-no."

"I'm gonna take another guess and say that now when you know about me, you're going to be so very nice to her. Won't you?"

"Y-y-yes."

"Good."

"I still think breaking his fingers is gonna be a good reminder," Wrench muttered.

“So eager,” Mitch chided. “Not this time Wrench, but you got first dibs on his fingers if he keeps pissing me off.”

“I won’t piss you off.”

“She’s gonna quit, you made sure of that, just leave her the fuck alone until she does. Or I’ll come back. I’ve been really stressed lately, and I have no problem with taking it all out on you. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

Bull took a step forward. “Do I need to explain what’ll happen if you mention this to anyone?”

“No.”

“Good, because if you do, me and blue-eyes here are gonna visit you alone,” he said with a nod towards Wrench. “I’ve been meaning to teach him some tricks and any asshole would work for that.”

“I’ll leave her alone,” he mumbled and stared at Mitch with wide eyes. “Just take your friends and leave.”

They left, and they’d just barely rounded the corner when Mac started to giggle.

“What?” Mitch asked.

“Nah, just Bull’s comment about lack of sex making him pesky.”

“What about it?” Bull snorted.

“Like you’d know. When the fuck did you go more than a week without sex?”

“It has happened!”

“When? And if it’s before you became a Marauder it doesn’t fucking count.”

Bull was quiet while thinking. “First year when I was married to Angie I didn’t fuck with anyone else while I was in Greenville.”

“Impressive,” Mac chuckled.

“I was smart enough to not hook up with a brother’s daughter. You’re fucking stuck,” Bull said and pointed at Mac. “For life!”

“Difference between you and me is that I don’t find that thought scary.”

“Totally pussy whipped,” Wrench said and by then they were at their bikes.

“We’re all pussy whipped,” Mac said and put his helmet on. “It’s just that I’m whipped by a specific one.”

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

It's Corny

-o0o-

I was sitting on our new armchair in our new master bedroom, which felt good and scary at the same time, but mostly good. The plan had been to keep Violet company while she worked on the wall painting, but I quickly realized that Mitch hadn't exaggerated when he said she wouldn't notice me anyway. She was completely lost in her work, and it looked amazing. I'd been worried it would be something in the line with the very male, action painting Mitch'd had at his old place, but it was nothing like it. She'd painted the wall red, and now she was doing one black and one white tree standing close to each other. It didn't take a genius to understand that she meant them as Mitch and me, and I really liked it.

Mitch had taken the room that used to be the practice room as his office. Violet was going to do something in there, too, but I'd agreed to not butt in on what, as long as he left the photo wall untouched. He'd seemed worried when they started taking down the mirrors, but I told him it was okay. It seemed silly to keep the room as some kind of shrine when none of us would be using it. Even if our girl would want to dance ballet, we could put the mirrors back up then, but it was years until that would happen.

April and Edie were in Sprout's room. They'd told me to leave it to them, and that way I could blame them if Mitch complained about how girly it was. I suspected they just liked doing a baby girl's room, since they both only had boys. The guys had snorted about the pinkness of the room, but it actually wasn't that pink. The crib and drawers were in a wood so dark it was almost black, and even if the walls were in pink, one wall was gray with another tree on it. It was really pretty black tree with white flowers and pink butterflies. Even Mitch was okay with the room. Or... okay... he said he thought it could've been worse.

Mac came into the room, and after putting a hand on Vi's back, he gave her a kiss and mumbled, "Hey, Katze."

"Ah, so the trick is physical contact?" I laughed. I had tried talking to her a couple of times, but she hadn't seemed to notice.

"Yeah." Violet looked embarrassed. "Sorry if I ignored you."

"Don't worry about it. I just thought it would be nice of me to keep you entertained, but you didn't seem to need it."

"Painting is her favorite entertainment," Mac said. "And you're not fooling me. You wanted to sit in that cozy armchair."

"I did. Not like I'm any help, since I can't carry things anyway."

Irina and I had been anxious about the moving and how it would work logistically. Her things were going to Mitch's place, and his things were coming here, which could've been a mess if it hadn't been for Mel. She'd been barking out orders, had marked everything, and had had the guys working their asses off. Irina had ended up asking if Mel wasn't looking for a job, because her organizing skill would have made her very valuable at the ballet. It had all been done in a matter of hours, and now Mel was organizing the kitchen. I hadn't had the heart to tell her that I wasn't much of a cook, because she seemed so eager to make it all perfect for me.

"Hey, Gimp," Mitch said as he dropped a box on the floor. He turned to view the wall painting. "That's great. I like it."

"She's gonna do some butterflies and flowers on it," I said.

He pulled me out of the chair and gave me a kiss. "No she's not. You're keeping the girly shit in the nursery. That was the deal."

"If we ever have a boy, you're gonna go crazy with bikes in there, aren't you?"

"Totally," he smiled. "How's the leg and back?"

"They're okay. I haven't done much, to be honest."

“Good. You’re not supposed to.” He gave my forehead a kiss.

“When were you going to the ballet?” Mac asked.

That made Violet turn around. “You’ve heard something or are you just going to another show?”

“No, it’s about a job. The shoe person is retiring in six months. She said she could do that with a clear conscience if I took over. I’m going there next month for an introduction, and I’ll take over after my maternity leave,” I explained. “She used to be a ballet dancer, and she wanted another dancer to take over after her.”

“I guess you know a lot about ballet shoes,” Violet smiled. “It sounds great.”

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “There’s a podiatrist there, a foot doctor, and a bunch of other specialists, and that feels safe. I’ll be in charge of the shoe stock, and help the dancers a little, too. Either way, I’m back at a ballet, and it beats my current job.”

Although my current job hadn’t been so bad the last few weeks, and I had a nagging feeling it had something to do with Mitch. I’d asked him, but he told me to just enjoy my last months there, and that the option had been to have him support me because he wouldn’t accept that I was ‘in constant pain just ‘cause some fuck made my life harder than it had to be.’ My comment about how I was in constant pain no matter what had met deaf ears, but I had to admit it had been worse than it needed to be for a while, and now it was getting slightly better.

The current plan was that I’d quit my job, have the baby, and stay at home with her until I could start at the ballet. I was going there the following month to be with Margaret, the current shoe lady, for a few days, and she’d promised to stay for a few weeks when I started, too, to make sure I got the hang of everything. I was mostly worried about the ordering and budget, but Irina had assured me it wasn’t hard, and Mitch had said it was something he could do in his sleep, so he’d help me if I needed it.

Around ten p.m., they'd all left, and I was leaning against Mitch on the new couch. I was watching a movie while he played around with the computer with one hand and the other one stroked Sprout. It was just two more months, but given the size of my stomach, I was starting to wonder what I'd look like before this was over.

“Wasn't that the chick who shot him?” Mitch suddenly asked. I turned towards him with raised eyebrows. “The chick he's banging now, isn't she the one who shot him like half an hour ago?” he clarified.

“You're watching?”

“Yeah, of course. What?”

“I thought you were playing with your computer.”

“Fucking hell, Gimp, you make it sound ridiculous when you say it like that—*playing*.”

“Then what are you doing?”

“Actually, I'm doing Vi's accounting, discussing and creating a new rootkit with Mech, and I'm reading the news.” He waved his right hand in the air. “All with one hand.”

“If you take the movie out of the equation, think you can do something more creative with your left hand than just stroking my belly?”

With a smile he stroked his hand up my bare leg and under my nightgown. “Get rid of the granny panties and I'll show you.”

I'd given up on the sexy, low-cut boy shorts and had followed Violet's suggestion to buy pregnancy panties. Mitch's reaction the first time had been priceless—and slightly humiliating. He'd held them up with wide eyes and then started to laugh so hard he had to sit down. He'd pointed out later that he might've laughed, but he hadn't lost his hard-on, so I was safe even in the unbelievably unsexy panties—I'd still get laid.

I pulled them down and threw them on the floor, and I could see Mitch's smile when he looked at them.

“You still love me,” I said and closed my eyes when I felt his hand along the inside of my thigh.

“Sure do,” he chuckled. He kept teasing me, and when I felt his other hand reaching for my breast I opened my eyes. “What happened to Mech, the accounting, and the news?”

“Fuck ‘em.” He leaned down and gave me a long kiss while his fingers played with me until my legs shook. “On your side,” he mumbled when he began unbuttoning his jeans.

“Side?”

He nodded. “Wanna try something.”

Him ‘trying something’ was usually something really damn good, so I just pulled off my nightgown and did as he’d asked. Mitch pushed my upper leg up, as much as my belly would let him, and straddled my lower leg.

“This okay?”

“Yeah.” And the words had barely left my mouth before he pushed inside. “Oh!”

He leaned over me and turned my head towards him.

“Look at me.”

I held his eyes with mine and ran my fingers over his chest and down the treasure trail and circled his dick to feel it going inside of me. When he groaned, I moved even further down to cup his balls in my hand.

“I wish I had the bullet vibrator now,” I murmured, and he kissed me hard.

“Don’t talk,” he groaned when he let go for a second before fusing his mouth to mine again.

When he let go, I took a shot, “Seksual’naya tvar’.”

“Oh, you bitch,” he chuckled.

“Ty tak legko.”

“More,” he said with a big smile and started to move faster.

“O svozey lyubvi ya gotov slagat’ legendy,” I mumbled, and it was the first time I’ve ever said that because I’d always

thought it was so corny.

Mitch stopped. “What does that mean?”

“Why do you ask?” I pushed on his hip. “Keep moving.”

“You blushed when you said it. But start with the first thing you said, what does it mean?”

“Sexy beast,” I laughed, and he gave me a kiss. “The second means ‘you’re so easy.’”

“I’m still more interested in the third,” he said and slowly rolled his hips. I groaned and pulled him down for a kiss. The position was amazing. Lying on my side was the most comfortable for me, and with my leg bent it was even better. He was leaning over me, but didn’t have to be careful to not squash Sprout, which made me wonder... “Tell me,” he said with another thrust.

“I’ll tell you if you admit that Mac told you about this position.”

“Yeah. He told me about three others that we’re gonna try, too.” He ran his hand over my belly and squeezed my breast, pinching my nipple. “Your turn.”

“It’s corny,” I moaned since he just then pushed harder and deeper inside of me. “Something Russians say sometimes.”

“I like your Russian things, Zvezda.”

“I’m ready to write legends about my love.”

He halted and stared at me, and then he started to fuck me, but he kept talking while he did. “I love you,” he groaned. “So fucking much. And I’m sorry I can’t say it in the fancy ways you can.”

“There are no bad ways to say I love you.” His fingers hit my clit and I was getting there. “Don’t stop, Mitch.”

He kept it up, and I came with a cry while I felt him grow harder, and he came just after me. He stayed on top of me, though.

“So no bad ways to say I love you?” he asked while still panting.

“No. It’s what you’re saying, not how you say it.”

He pulled out of me and helped me to stand up. When he threw my nightgown at me, I felt slightly insulted for a second.

“To dry off,” he explained. I still hadn’t gotten used to this part of having sex without a condom, and I didn’t particularly like it—semen running out of me. It also smelled, and Mitch knew I wanted to dry it off. I still wasn’t sure how the hell I’d missed it the first time, but I assumed the shower had taken care of it that time. “Also, if you use that to dry off, I might be able to convince you to sleep naked.”

“Don’t I always?” I asked as I dried the inside of my thighs before I threw it back to him. “I just didn’t want to lie on the couch watching a movie naked.”

“Why not?” He pulled me in for a kiss. “I still have some work to do, but feel free to lie on the couch naked next to me.”

“I’m taking a shower and then I’m going to bed. And you’re smoking on the balcony.”

“I’m smoking on the balcony,” he confirmed. It hadn’t really been an argument, but he kept forgetting to go outside for that, and I didn’t want him smoking inside when Sprout was born. “I love you, and I’ll find a fancy way to tell you one of these days.”

“I know.”

I started towards the bathroom and was halfway there when he called for me.

“Turn around!”

“Why?” I said but did turn to see what he wanted.

“Nah... just, you look funny and sexy at the same time with that belly, but I definitely like it.”

“You better. It’s your fault.”

“I have no memory of you protesting when I followed you into the shower.”

“I think we’ve established that I’m the horny, easy one!”

“Think we’ve established that we both are, Gimp,” he smiled. “Want some company in the shower?”

“Always,” I answered and continued to the bathroom, confident that he’d follow me.

He did.

-o0o-

Tommy, the newest member, was the one who’d somehow ended up as my watcher that day, which was unusual, since he was a member and it had mostly been Wrench or some hang-arounds before. If none of them was available, I’d been alone, but Mitch kept calling me those days. Tommy didn’t seem happy about it, and to add to insult, he had to follow me to my physical therapy, and he seemed extremely uncomfortable.

“You’re not coming with me inside,” I said. “You’ll be waiting in the reception area.”

“I know. Mitch was very clear on that, too.”

I wasn’t sure why he was so jumpy until the lady in the reception gave Tommy a wide smile.

“Tommy! It’s good to see you. It’s been a long time. What are you doing here?”

“I’m with her,” he said and pointed at me.

They talked for a while, and when she went back to her spot behind the desk, Tommy came to sit down next to me. He gave me an almost embarrassed look.

“I was in an accident, and I needed to come here for a while when I’d just moved to Greenville.”

“I hope it wasn’t too serious.”

“It fucked up my leg and shoulder a little, but no, not too bad.” He didn’t look at me when he said the next thing. “My friend died.”

“I’m really sorry, Tommy,” I said and took his hand. “That must have been awful.”

“We were in the Marines together. I drove the Humvee and... they attacked. We’d been friends since we were kids.”

“That must be unusual, to be able to stay together with your friend all through the Army.”

“Yeah. We were both kind of stubborn fuckers, though, and we’d always talked about doing it together. We were both military brats, and I practically grew up at his house.”

I squeezed his hand because I didn’t know what else to do. “It must’ve been hard for you to come back and meet them.”

“Yeah,” he nodded. “Think that was the hardest part, to be honest.” He looked at me with a smile. “Survivor’s guilt, you know. It’s natural.”

“That doesn’t make it any easier. I had a shrink for about forty-five minutes. He started talking about all the things I could expect would happen. I doubt *knowing* what will happen make it all that much easier.” I took a closer look. “Marines?”

“Yeah. Scout sniper.”

“Wow! 20/20 vision?”

“Yup,” he said with a wink.

I’d never really talked to Tommy, but he seemed like a nice guy. Mitch had mentioned him now and then, but he never told me private things about anyone and tended to let me make up my own mind about the guys.

“I just realized that I don’t know much about you. Are you married or... have an Old Lady?” It felt absolutely ridiculous every time I said those words—old lady. “Or kids?”

“No, nothing like that. Just me. Got a brother up in New York, he’s a firefighter, but that’s the only family I’ve got left.” Then he smiled. “And the Marauder family, of course.”

“Of course,” I laughed.

When Brett came out to get me for the training, I actually felt a bit sorry. It had been a really nice conversation, unlike any I’ve had with any of my other watchers. Wrench rarely said anything, and the hang-arounds mostly seemed worried they’d mess up. Whenever I met any of the other members, Mitch was with me, and that didn’t give me the opportunity to talk the way I just had with Tommy.

I mentioned it to Mitch later that night. “I talked to Tommy today. I liked him.”

“Yeah, he mentioned that. Think he was worried you’d make it sound like he was hitting on you or something.”

“No. The lady at the reception recognized him, so we started talking about why he’d been there. One thing led to another. It just made me realized I haven’t talked to that many of them.” I sat down on the bed and reached for the oil. “Except Sisco, but he was definitely hitting on me.”

“He’s always like that, and it was to fuck with me, too.”

“I gathered.”

Mitch looked really tired, but he’d looked like that for weeks, and I had absolutely no idea what to do about it, or how to help him. I took his hands and put them on Sprout.

“She’s really bouncing around today.”

“Yeah,” he said and his face turned into a big smile. “Doing pirouettes, I bet.”

“More like tap dancing.” I raked my fingers through his beard while he was preoccupied with feeling Sprout move. “You’d tell me if there was something I could do for you?”

“Just keep doing things like this,” he answered with a tired smile.

“I realized something else today. It hasn’t even been a year since we had sex for the first time. Not even since we met.” It had struck me in the car while I was on my way home. “And we’re having a kid and live together. That’s a bit... fast.”

“It’s also pretty fucking awesome.”

“Your mom said that last Thanksgiving, you’d said you’d put a bullet in your head if you had a kid by the next Thanksgiving.”

“And how pleased did she look when she told you?” he asked with a laugh.

“Really pleased.” I’d met Donna quite a few times, and I really liked her. She reminded me a lot of Irina, just with a

fouler mouth, but there was the same in-your-face honesty about her. “She also said I didn’t have to worry about you saying you’d never buy Sprout princess dresses—she’d do it.”

“Bet she will.”

“Mel, Edie, and April said the same thing. And Irina will supply her with tutus.”

He pulled me down to lie on the bed next to him with a laugh. “I’m buying her bike t-shirts and jeans, then.”

“She’ll definitely have enough clothes.”

“She’ll have enough of everything,” he murmured against my lips. “I’ll make fucking sure of that.”

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Productive Day?

-o0o-

They were going on a run with the first big shipment for the Dutch two days later. The only ones who'd go all the way to New York were Brick and Bear. They were picking up other presidents and VPs along the way, and they were all staying for a top meet in New York. Four days later, some of them were taking a flight to Amsterdam to wait for the shipment, travel with it up to Denmark with the Smiling Ghouls, and from where they eventually would fly back home.

And while Dawg growled about the run meaning he was missing Edie's birthday, Mitch's only focus was the fact that Hump was still out there. What had started as something that bugged him, had turned into something that worried him, and now it terrified him. The longer it took, the more sure he became that Hump was planning something big, something soul-tearing, and his active imagination made him imagine things which woke him up in a cold sweat every fucking night—just like they had that particular night. He'd woken up and after assuring himself that Anna was okay, he'd gone into his office to get some work done.

“Can't sleep?” Anna asked behind him, and he turned around with a deep sigh and shook his head. “Want some company?”

“Absolutely,” he answered and patted his lap. She immediately came over and sat down with an arm around his neck.

“What are you doing?” she asked while she eyed his screens. He had the best setup at his home office, several screens and a monster of a computer. Even Mech was jealous of it.

“I'm checking some things, upgrading some other things, and programming some things.” He kissed her shoulder. “Want

a better explanation?”

“You could probably say anything, and I wouldn’t even know if you were making fun of me or being serious.”

“Most likely,” he agreed and leaned forward to send Mech a message about what he’d done and what they needed to do the next day. “Why are you up?”

“Heartburn. Just went to get some Tums and assumed you were in here.”

Mitch leaned back and took a good look at Anna. She’d seemed even more tired the last few weeks, and he knew it wasn’t just heartburn that kept her up at nights. She was in a lot of pain, and it was also the fact that she had to pee once an hour. He’d mentioned it to Mac, which had led to Vi holding the longest monologue he’d ever heard coming out of her mouth. It was about how horrible it was being pregnant, and how idiotic men were when they didn’t understand that. She’d stomped outside and slammed the door shut behind her. Mac had shrugged, but added that it might not be strange if Anna seemed tired.

“Want me to carry you back to bed?” he asked, and she nodded against his chest. He took her cane and gave it to her to hold, and got up. Even if he couldn’t take her on his back, he still liked to carry her, and he knew she needed it. Especially at night when she woke up stiff and sore. “Fuck, you’re getting heavy, Gimp.”

“I know,” she sighed. “And I fart and burp all the time. I’ll be completely repulsive soon.”

“You’re sexy. Really sexy.”

“I look like a kangaroo when I look at my body from above,” she said with a sad voice. “I noticed it yesterday.”

He almost dropped her when he started laughing. “I’m sorry,” he hurried to say. “Just took me by surprise.”

“It’s okay. I laughed, too.”

He put her down on the bed and lay down next to her. “I do think you’re sexy, and really, really beautiful.”

“That’s probably because you love me in combination with some caveman reaction to me carrying your offspring.”

“That might be it,” he agreed, because he found her big belly so incredibly sexy. It was in the way when they fucked, and it was obviously hurting her, but still so god damn beautiful. He couldn’t stop touching it. “Doesn’t mean I don’t think you’re sexy. Think it’s one of those things you should go with and not question too much.”

“Okay,” she whispered and gave him one of those smiles that made him prepare to wade through blood just to make sure she was okay. At least she was away from that fucking job at the theater, and she was going to the ballet for a work introduction the following week. “Are you gonna get back up or will you stay here with me for a while?”

“I’m gonna try to get some sleep, too.”

He kicked off his pants and crawled under the cover with her. She soon fell asleep, and after a while he managed to fall asleep, too, while holding his hand on Sprout to feel her move around inside Anna.

-o0o-

Russ was back, and Mitch managed to catch him between the discussion he had with Brick, Bear, and Bull.

“Hey, kid,” Russ said when he saw him. “I got fuck all as far as Hump goes, but I found his daughter.”

“What did she say?”

“Nothing. She was dead.”

“Dead?” Mitch stared at him. “He killed his own kid?”

“That’s what it looks like, or someone else did.”

“Sounds fucking insane. How fucked up would you have to be to kill your own kid?”

“Pretty fucking fucked up,” Russ agreed. “I can’t even imagine it. The shit I’d do to anyone who hurt one of my kids... I don’t get it.”

Mitch had read about how men had pregnancy hormones just as the women did, and he wondered if his reaction could have something to do with that, but he couldn't even for a split second imagine what could make a man kill his own kid. All he'd seen of his was a blurry picture, and he was already prepared to do anything for her. He looked at Russ again.

"Where did you find her?"

"A morgue in Globe."

"Globe, Arizona? When?"

"This morning."

"He's really fucking close," Mitch muttered.

"That was my thought. My other thought was that something seemed a bit strange. She was poisoned."

"That's a..."

"Female way of killing," Russ nodded. "That's why I thought it was strange. So he might have had his bitch do it for him. I thought I'd find out more about her."

"About his Old Lady?"

"We don't know much about her. She was a sweetbutt at first and probably did her best to... you know, seem perfect," Russ said with a smile. "I got the main facts from you, but that's just the official shit, and she's from the same town as my Old Lady grew up in. It's full of religious nuts."

"Ronnie grew up in a religious home? I thought she was Wolf's niece."

"She is, but her parents were very religious. Some smaller church, and when her dad died, her mom married an even more nutty religious guy."

"Got a hard time picturing Ronnie as a religious nut."

"She kind of had a hard time with that, too, which is why she left," Russ laughed. "My point is, if she's from one of the more nutty families, I think we need to find out what she's like."

“So you thought you’d go there and poke around?”

“I thought I would,” Russ confirmed. “I gotta check a thing for your dad first, but I’m going there on my way back here. I’m not sure it’ll give anything, but I’m starting to suspect that she might be the bigger problem.”

“Because Hump’s daughter was poisoned?”

“I know it’s vague—”

“Actually, it’s not. I’m more wondering if he even knows his daughter is dead?”

“She hasn’t been dead for long. No official statement yet, but the coroner thought it was around three days.”

“I need updates on this,” he mumbled. “I’m gonna go poke an idiot fucking cop that’s been bugging me.”

“Poke him with what?”

“He’s been fucking around with his partner, and he’s emptied all his financial resources. Unless his partner has some expensive habits that he pays for, which I don’t think she does, he’s got a gambling problem. Has spent a lot of time on online poker sites.”

“Probably the only way for cops to win.”

“Yeah, well, detective Gordon can’t even win online,” Mitch said. “He’s tapped out.”

Russ gave him a crooked smile. “You hacked his accounts?”

“Yes, I did,” Mitch confirmed. “I hacked pretty much anything I could find on him. He’s been up my ass about Hump’s murders. Thought I’d show him how you really do when you crawl up a man’s ass.”

“That was a bit gay, kid.”

“Yeah, I heard that myself,” Mitch laughed. “Either way, think he’ll be able to keep me updated.”

“How the fuck is he supposed to explain his interest in a dead girl in Globe to his superiors?”

“That’s not my problem,” Mitch said when he got up. “Let me know what you find.”

“You know I will.”

“Where are you going?” Brick asked him when he was on his way out.

“Russ found Hump’s daughter at the morgue in Globe. She’d been poisoned. I’m gonna use what I have on Gordon to get him to help us out. You okay with that?”

“Yeah. Don’t think anyone will protest. Just pushing his buttons?”

“Thought I’d offer him something that looks like cooperation. He’s all over the murders, and he’ll realize why I’m asking anyway. If he doesn’t get it, his slightly smarter partner will.”

“Good idea. We might need him later, too, so use a carrot, too,” Brick nodded. “Go for it.”

Mitch left the clubhouse and decided to pay a visit to his favorite gorilla detective, Gordon, on his way home. He halted by Lisa on his way to his bike. She looked really upset, and he had almost collided with Sisco on his way out from the clubhouse, and he’d looked pretty fucking upset, too. He had no idea what those two were up to, but it didn’t look as if it was making either one of them very happy.

“Wanna talk about it?” he asked Lisa.

“No. I don’t.” She looked at him and tried to smile. “You wanna talk about it? You look like shit, and you have for a while. Is it about Anna?”

“Sort of, but not the way you think. We’re good.”

Anna was about the only really good thing at the moment, which was probably why he was even more stressed about Hump. It was good, and he knew he’d go crazy if he lost it.

“I know you two see each other sometimes,” he continued. “How is she really?”

“The pain is getting pretty bad, she’s been very fed up with her job, but that’s sorted now, with her new job, I mean.” Lisa shrugged. “Otherwise she’s fine.”

“Not worried about... the thing that’s worrying me?”

“No, Mr. Mysterious. She hasn’t mentioned it much, but I think the only reason it’s bugging her is that it’s obviously getting to you. And for some peculiar reason she loves you,” Lisa smiled, and it was nice to see her smile. He realized it had been quite some time since he’d last seen that. “She trusts you.”

He did a mental calculation about how little time he had, but finally just decided that if she needed him, he’d be there for her, and he sat down next to Lisa.

“Sure you don’t want to talk about it?”

“I had some problems back in L.A. It was a guy— obviously—and at the same time I got the offer to come here and be a part of the study I’m working on now. They asked for me especially, and I took it.” She looked at him with determined eyes. “It wasn’t because of the guy. It was something I wanted to do.”

Mitch wasn’t convinced that was the entire truth, but she needed to think it was, so he agreed, “Okay. So what’s going on with Sisco?”

Sisco was about twenty years older than Lisa. That kind of age difference wasn’t unheard of. Sisco wouldn’t even be very original when it came to bikers if he had a much younger woman—he’d be more of a cliché. Mitch just had a really fucking hard time imagining Sisco locked down with any woman, and if his recent arguments with Lisa were any indication, so did Sisco.

“That’s actually a much longer and older story that you’d think,” she muttered.

The ‘older’ sounded ominous if you took Bear into account, because he was very protective of his girls, and if Sisco’d fucked up, Bear would get back at him, no matter how long ago it had happened. But if Bear ever found out, it

wouldn't be because Mitch told him. Mitch, Mac, and Lisa'd made a pact years ago, before the fact that they were different sexes mattered much to them, that whatever they said to each other was between them. They never passed it on.

"You never told me that," he said.

"I was very drunk and upset, and he was very drunk, too."

"If you tell me he popped your cherry, I might hurl."

"No!" she laughed. "And I was eighteen."

"Yeah, because we know that matters to Bear." He put an arm around her. "I'm guessing this was around the time when Freddie dumped you and you cut off your hair. Now another guy dumped you, and somehow you go running back to the bearded, longhaired biker who looks like a slightly younger version of your dad again."

She glared at him, but he could see a smile on her lips. "Electra complex?"

"Am I close?"

"Annoyingly so, when I think about it." She looked at his leg that was jumping up and down, like it always did when he was stressed, something Lisa knew. "And you're stressed. Run off and do whatever you were supposed to do. I'll live."

"Sure?"

He really wanted to go, but he'd stay and talk to Lisa if she needed it. Not like Gordon was going anywhere. The stress was more because he had a need to do something, to feel like they were moving forward. Lisa shook her head.

"I'm sure."

"Just get laid. Anyone. Someone who looks mighty kinky, and who can fuck that angst out of you."

She took a deep breath. "I might just do that." She gave his cheek a kiss. "Thank you Dr. Mitch."

"Any time, Dr. Warren." He jumped down and started towards his bike again, but turned around. "That guy at

Wicked Ink, Chris, he's got an apadravya. I've heard those are good."

"A rod through his dick?"

"Yeah."

"He has a girlfriend."

"Not anymore." He straddled his bike. "If you go there, let me know what it was like."

"Well, I do have a few days off later this month," she smiled. "I might just offer him a three-day sex fest so I can do some research."

He laughed and started his bike. It sounded like she'd be fine. Lisa had a tendency to always land on her feet.

-o0o-

Detective Gordon looked ready to strike when he opened the door and saw him, and Mitch held up his hand to calm him down.

"I suggest you come outside and close the door. I don't think you want your wife to hear what I have to say."

Gordon took a step outside and closed the door behind him. "If this is about Evans, I'd rather tell her about our affair than help you."

"That is just *awesome*, Gordon. I think you should tell her, because honesty is so very important to get a marriage to work. At least that's what I've heard. While you tell her about Evans, you should probably also tell her about the mortgages you've taken out on your lovely house here, and how you've maxed out each and every one of your credit cards." He noticed Gordon take a deep breath. "A little gambling problem? Not doing too well on those poker sites?"

"What do you want?"

"Actually, I think this could be a mutually beneficial situation. A girl was found poisoned in Globe. I need all the info you can get me on that murder."

Gordon kept eyeing him, and Mitch sighed. The ‘mutually beneficial’ and ‘dead girl’ should’ve clued him in on why Mitch was interested. Especially since he had asked for information and not for evidence to disappear, but Gordon obviously had no idea. He truly hoped he’d mention this to his partner, because Gordon alone wouldn’t be of much help. It was much more likely that Evans would be able to put two and two together and understand what Mitch was looking for—and why.

“A murdered woman, close by, and I’m interested. Do I have to fucking spell it out to you?” Mitch asked.

“You think she’s got something to do with the two other murders?”

“That’s what I wanna know.” No point in giving him enough clues to figure out who the actual murderer was, and how it was linked to the Marauders. And it was obvious that without having it spelled out, Gordon wouldn’t solve anything. Evans might, so Mitch decided to be careful with what he was telling them while still giving them enough. “So you get in contact with them, and then you let me know what they say. Anything they say.”

Mitch could probably hack their local police stations servers without much of an effort, but he wanted the gossip side of the investigation, too. He had a feeling that would be much more interesting from his point of view than the official reports. Not even mentioning that the redneck cops in those areas weren’t that efficient, and it would most likely take weeks before they had it all on their servers.

Gordon’s gorilla jaws were working until he eventually spit out, “Okay.”

“Good. I’ll contact you. If you do a good job, we might be able to help you with your debts.”

He left him outside his house, and by the time Mitch took off, Gordon was still standing there. If he had half a brain, he understood that this wouldn’t be the only favor Mitch would be asking of him.

Anna was in bed by the time he came home, and he snuck into bed behind her with a content sigh.

“Productive day?” she asked in a murmur as she pressed herself closer to him.

“You could say that,” he chuckled.

He wasn't sure how much use Gordon would really be in this particular case, but he could help them, and even if he couldn't, they had him under their thumb now. In the middle of the rest of the shit, that made it a really productive day.

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You Missed The Exit

-o0o-

I'd been longing for this day, and even if it had been slightly forgotten in the middle of having spent the last month with getting the apartment done, it had been in the back of my mind the entire time. It was my first day at the ballet.

Or, it wasn't exactly my first day, since this was just an introduction, but no matter what, I was going to the ballet and not just to watch, but to work.

Margaret, or Maggie, as everyone called her, giggled when I eagerly hobbled into the shoe storage.

"Think I saw your belly coming around the shelf a few seconds before you showed up."

"I'm massive, I know."

"What week are you?"

"Thirty-six."

"Then you're not massive, sweetheart," she smiled. "How do you feel about this?"

"Eager and nervous at the same time. I'm glad to be back, but there's a lot of things regarding this that I'm worried about."

"There's nothing to it at all. You'll do fine, and I can retire knowing that someone who truly knows how a shoe should fit is in charge. The ordering and the budget is nothing to worry about at all. I'll make sure you know all those things before I leave."

She started showing me around, and I was surrounded by shoes. The idea of being surrounded by shoes had, in all honesty, been the biggest source of anxiety. How I'd react, because the shoes were such a symbol of dancing. I knew

exactly how the silk felt under my hands, what they sounded like when I ran over the floor at the different stages of wear, and how a new pair of shoes felt when I slipped my foot inside them. All that, despite not having done it in years.

The first time I tried pointe shoes was something I'd never forget—no dancer ever did. A woman from the shoe shop came to class and had brought all kinds of different shoes, and everyone who was the right age and at the right stage of training had immediately started trying them on. I'd brought my first pair home, and Irina had showed me how to prepare them and the different things I could try to use to spare my feet as much as possible, like toe pads, gel toe spacers, and tape. The only thing I'd used after a few years was lambs wool.

My hand was shaking when I carefully ran it over a shelf full of shoes, and I drew a deep, shaky breath when I felt them under my fingertips for the first time in years.

“You okay, love?” Maggie asked.

I turned to her and nodded, which contradicted the tears in my eyes. “I miss them,” I admitted.

“I know what you mean,” she smiled. “I'll let you in on a secret,” she continued and hooked her arm in mine as she moved us further into the room. “The first few years when I worked here, I missed dancing so much I sometimes put on a pair of shoes just to feel them on my feet. Only when I was alone, though. Sometimes I cried like a baby.”

I laughed. “I just might do that.”

“You should. I consider it a work benefit.”

That first day was mostly her showing me how she'd set up the storage room. She emphasized that I was free to make changes if I thought it was necessary. The storage room was my dominion, and I'd be in charge of it. She admitted that some of the dancers might bitch about it if I made changes, but that they'd get used to it. I didn't see any need to make any changes. It all seemed very cleverly organized.

“What kind of shoes did you have?” she asked me towards the end.

“I had my own maker at the ballet, they were fitted for me especially, but I used Bloch before that. Serenade.”

“Remember your size?”

“Does anyone ever forget?” I asked with a laugh. “6.5 C.”

“Want a pair?”

I nodded. “Is this another one of the things you consider a work benefit?”

“Think you should get used to the shoes. It’ll help you not cry when you’re here.”

“So this is experience talking?”

“Definitely. You need to get used to them again.”

I held my bag against my chest on my way home, and if Irina noticed, she didn’t comment on it. She asked me a few questions, but really general ones. She understood what it had meant to me, but didn’t want to bug me with questions, and I truly appreciated it.

Mitch was at home when I arrived, and for a second I was annoyed. I would’ve wanted to be alone with my shoes—a sentence that sounded really strange even in my head.

“What are you doing home?” I asked.

“Wanted to be here,” he shrugged. “How was it?”

The question sank in, I thought about it carefully, and Mitch laughed.

“That good?”

“Yes.” I picked the shoes out of my bag. “She gave me a pair of shoes.”

“Okay?” he said and looked slightly confused. “Why?”

“I cried a little when I touched the shoes,” I admitted. He raised an eyebrow, and I wanted to make him understand. “Think of it as a bike, and you haven’t seen or touched one in a really long time, and even if you can’t ride it...”

“It’s still a bike, and I could fiddle with it a little,” he nodded—he understood! He leaned his forehead against mine.

“Wanna be alone with your shoes and fiddle with them a little?”

“Yes,” I mumbled.

“Just... be careful. Okay? I don’t wanna come home and find you sprawled out on the floor with a broken ankle.”

“I won’t try to walk on them. I’m just gonna prepare them a little. She gave me the things I needed. I just... need...”

“I get it, Gimp,” he smiled. “I really do.”

He cupped my face in his hands and gave me a long kiss before he turned around and strolled towards the door.

“Mitch.”

“Yeah, babe.”

“Thank you, and I love you.”

“Love you, too. Have fun!”

-o0o-

Mitch didn’t come home until I’d gone to bed and was already asleep. He’d called me before that to make sure I wasn’t sprawled out on the floor, but by then I was already on the couch in front of the TV. Admittedly, I was wearing the shoes, but I hadn’t even tried to go up en pointe. I probably could, a little, but I would break my heart to notice how untrained my feet and ankles really were. I just liked the feeling of having them on. I didn’t tell him that part, though. Just said it was all okay, and that he could come home if he wanted to, but he had some work to do.

He woke me up the next morning by massaging my leg. This had turned into a habit, and it was by far the best wake-up calls I’d ever had. They quite often led to sex, but not always.

“Morning, Gimp,” he whispered when he noticed that I was awake. “Feeling okay?”

“As usual,” I sighed and stretched carefully while he was working on my muscles.

“Sure?”

“Yeah. What’s the worry?”

“I realized when I came home that you might’ve needed me last night.”

“No. I was fine. Honestly, I was. I enjoyed it, and I didn’t cry at all.”

“Not even a little sob?”

“Nope. Smiled like a moron most of the time, though,” I laughed. “It was nice. I probably should’ve done that a long time ago.”

He gave my scarred leg a few kisses while kneading my calf.

“Your belly is so big I can’t see you when I do this anymore.”

“Kissing my leg?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m pretty huge.”

“You’re also pretty sexy,” he mumbled from somewhere below my stomach. “And this might be weird, but I fucking love your leg.”

“I’ve noticed it doesn’t gross you out, but it does seem a little weird that you love it.”

He moved up over me and gave me a kiss.

“I love it, because those scars are why you’re here, in *our* bed, knocked up, and love me,” he smiled. “A girl like you wouldn’t have given me a shot otherwise.”

“I was pretty desperate, and you were the sluttiest guy I could find,” I admitted.

Mitch laughed. “You said nonjudgmental, not slutty.”

“Don’t think you would’ve given me a shot without that leg, either. You would’ve thought I was a stuck-up dancing doll.”

“I would’ve given you a shot. I imagined ten positions I’d fuck you in even before I knew you’d been in an accident.”

“Have we fucked in all of them?”

“Took us less than a month. I’d actually underestimated how flexible you are.” He looked at my belly. “Or were.”

“I’m still flexible, it’s just that it’s in the way.”

“I know, and I’m not complaining. Think some of the workarounds are gonna be in our fuck repertoire for years.” He gave me another kiss. “Get up and I’ll give you a lift to PT.”

“Think you can leave me there and let me get home by myself? I need to get you a present for tomorrow.”

It was his birthday the next day, and I still hadn’t bought him anything. He was not a guy who was easy to buy gifts for. The necklace I gave him for Christmas had worked well, but I didn’t really have any ideas like that this time around. I’d have liked to give him something that referred to Sprout, but that would’ve been a lot easier if she was born, and buying something *for* her was just insanely boring. I wanted something special for him, but I was all out of ideas. I’d even tried to ask Mac, but he admitted that buying things for Mitch was hard as hell. He usually ended up buying something that was more of a joke than a real gift, and I didn’t want to do that.

“We’re short on people, since some are away, and Brick didn’t want Mel and April alone. I’ll take you there, and then you call Lisa or Vi to take you home.”

“Violet?” I asked. “It’s not like Violet is a huge girl who looks like she can take down an army by herself, the way Tommy does.”

Mitch laughed. “No she couldn’t, but it’s more that I don’t want you alone. Just give one of them a call, and if they can’t, call me, and I’ll figure something out.” He leaned over me and gave me a kiss. “How about a shower and we’ll finish this?”

“That sounds good.”

-o0o-

Mitch followed me inside to say hi to Brett. The brotherly bonding, that had started with Brett helping him to make sure

I'd meet up with him later months earlier, had meant they were pretty close these days. Mitch had followed me there quite a few times. Most often, just like that day, he followed me inside, had a few words with Brett, and then left. He'd also asked Brett a few things about how he could help me better, and it had resulted in the two of them poking and pulling on me for a full hour. It had annoyed me at the time, but had helped a lot to make the morning and evening massages more efficient. They also hurt more and were less sexy, but given the current status of my body, I could live with that. I was, however, going to make sure he went back to the hornier massages as soon as Sprout was born and my body had healed.

"We skimped on the morning exercise today, so make sure you compensate for that," he said to Brett with a wink.

"Thanks a lot! He's gonna torture me now."

"I'll sort her out," Brett smiled at Mitch, completely ignoring me. They often did that, talked over my head, and it would have annoyed me a lot more than it did if I hadn't known that was the purpose. "Need to get her in shape for your birthday. Tomorrow, isn't it?"

"Yeah," Mitch smiled. He leaned down and gave me a kiss. "See ya tonight, baby."

"Awww," Brett cooed before pushing Mitch out the door. Then he turned to me. "Strip."

He worked me hard, but he got rid of the worst kinks in my back, and my leg felt better. He did mutter about obviously having skipped the morning workout, but agreed that I should get some credit for how much work I did on my own.

Once we were all done, I went out to the reception area to call Violet, but she was mid-ink and told me to call Mitch, that he'd send someone for me. I thanked her, but when I tried Mitch didn't pick up, and neither did Lisa.

"Problems?" Anita asked and put her magazine down on the table. "I could give you a lift."

Short of taking the bus or a cab, she seemed to be my only option, so I nodded.

“Thanks. That’s really nice. I’m just going downtown.”

“Doing some shopping?” she asked when she stood up and dug in her pockets for her keys.

“I need to try to find a birthday gift for Mitch.” We started towards the door. “But I must admit, I have no idea what to buy him. Birthday gifts tend to get harder to find the older the receiver gets.”

“So very true,” she smiled.

Her old Volvo smelled worse than ever, and she immediately began talking about some big crises in the chicken coop. I had a hard time seeing how chickens could be much of a problem. It wasn’t as if they were dogs who attacked each other, but that’s what it sounded like when she talked about them. ‘Rabid chickens,’ was that an actual thing?

“Uh,” I said and pointed. “I think you missed the exit.”

“Oh, sorry,” she laughed. “Too much in my head, I guess.”

That’s when I started to feel that something might be wrong, and I took a firmer grip of my cane, but it didn’t matter. Anita made a sudden movement, and then everything was black.

-o0o-

I was very confused the next time I woke up. At first I thought I wasn’t able to open my eyes, my next thought was that I’d gone blind, and my third that everything was hurting. I was in a state of panic for quite a while until I felt Sprout moving, so at least she was alive. Just being able to stop worrying about her made me capable of trying to organize my thoughts.

My arms were tied behind my back, I was lying on a concrete floor, and something tasting faintly of oil was covering my mouth. The last thing I remembered was being in the car with Anita.

I should’ve listened to Mitch, and instead of going with Anita, I should’ve just kept calling until he picked up, because he would’ve picked up. He’d never not answered my calls

before, so it was probably just a coincidence that he hadn't, and if I'd tried five minutes later he would've answered. At least that's what I hoped, because I didn't want to think there was even the slightest possibility that he was tied up in a dark room just as I was. I should've listened to him and not taken any chances, but I hadn't seen Anita as any risk whatsoever.

There were a lot of people I should have listened to. Especially my mom when she told me that the women always paid the price for men's deeds, because I assumed that that was what was happening now. Whoever the guy was that was after Mitch, he had me, and apparently Anita was working with him. Which surprised me. I'd never heard her talk about anyone but her man.

I assumed shock was the reason why it took me a while to realize that Anita's husband and the guy who was after Mitch were the same man. I'd just barely met him; it was Anita who did the talking, and I couldn't even remember his name. I wished I'd asked Mitch a few questions about Hump, but I'd never wanted to know. It felt better to just... pretend it wasn't an imminent problem, I guess. Somehow I'd convinced myself it was better if I didn't know too much about the club and what was going on, but obviously I should've asked.

After crying for a while, I got mad at Mitch instead. The anger escalated in proportion to how much my back and leg were aching. If he'd simply told me that the guy was missing a hand, we wouldn't be in this goddamn situation! Why had he skipped such basic information?

I heard a man and a woman argue outside, but also realized that it was the only sound I'd heard since I woke up, so I must be outside the city. Greenville wasn't New York, but it wasn't a dead town, so I would've heard something if we were in the more central areas.

I tried to remember where Anita had said they lived. It was somewhere pretty far away, but it was impossible for me to know how long I'd been out and how far we'd gone. It was pitch black, no natural light anywhere, and no sounds that could be any kind of lead. The only thing was the man and the

woman arguing outside, and they seemed pretty damn angry at each other.

“We were not going to take her until tomorrow,” the guy, I assumed it was Hump, yelled. “We were taking her on his birthday. That was the plan!”

“She was in my fucking car. Not like we’d get a better chance than that,” Anita yelled back.

I couldn’t help wondering if the only reason he’d gone to physical therapy was to get to me, but that seemed like a stupid risk, and I tried to remember if he’d started before or after I met Mitch. I was pretty sure it was after, but still long before it got serious. I had a vague memory of when we’d changed days, and that was definitely after I’d started seeing Mitch, but few people had even known about it until Joshua was born. On the other hand, if he’d been keeping an eye on Mitch, he could’ve found out early. It wasn’t as if we were sneaking around. If they’d been outside his place, they would’ve seen me coming.

If the idea had been to get close to me, it was brilliant. If Anita had come to my place, I might’ve thought it a bit odd, but I would’ve let her in. Without a doubt.

I knew my mind was racing, but it was this or pure panic, and I assumed this was a better option. It was also this or paying attention to my body and how much it was hurting. I was wondering how long they would keep me here, but it sounded as if whatever they had planned would happen tomorrow, on Mitch’s birthday. I just really, really hoped they wouldn’t keep me on a concrete floor, because I doubted I’d be able to walk tomorrow if they did. Then other things occurred to me. Like how having me on a concrete floor for a night might be the best option in a whole line of really shitty things. Like rape or torture. Would they do that? Did people do that to pregnant women? It dawned on me that some people didn’t care about much, and they’d killed a woman simply for having a shop across the street from Mitch’s mom’s salon, so raping and torturing a pregnant woman probably wasn’t that much of an issue.

That's when the panic hit me like a freight train, and hyperventilating through my nose with an oily rag in my mouth wasn't a good thing. I couldn't even cry properly, and when the snot started to fill my nose, I couldn't breathe, either. When the door flew open and light fill the room, I shut my eyes and screamed.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

I'm Here

-o0o-

It was a slow day at the garage. With Brick and Bear in Europe, there wasn't really anyone around to keep yelling at them to pick up the pace. Mel was much too kind to use the whip to any greater extent. It was more likely that she'd lure people into working with the help of cookies.

Mitch was working on a bike, and he couldn't help thinking about Anna and the shine she'd had in her eyes the day before when she talked about the shoes Maggie had given her. How it had been so fucking obvious that she just wanted him out of the apartment to be able to play with them, but when she'd asked him to imagine himself not being allowed to see our touch a bike for years—that's when he'd gotten it.

His burner rang, and after wiping his hands, he answered.

“Yeah?”

“It's Russ. I've been talking to that bitch's family, Hump's old lady, and she's a fucking mental case. She torched her former boyfriend's trailer and beat up another boyfriend's ex-wife. In general, I think she's the problem.”

“Shit.”

“I'm not saying Hump isn't a fucking nut, too, because I'm pretty sure he is, but those two in combination is bad as fuck.”

“Anything else?”

“According to the bitch's cousin, Hump's in Greenville for PT every week. Drives really fucking far to do it. The bitch usually calls him while waiting for him.”

Mitch started towards his bike and waved at Mac and Sisco. “When does she call?”

“That’s why I’m calling you immediately. On Thursday mornings, so you should be able to catch him.”

Mitch was about to throw up. Anna had been going to physical therapy every Thursday for as long as he’d known her, so there was nothing saying that it should be worse today, but Anna’d been getting lift from some chick whose husband went really far to get PT, so that added up in a terrifying way.

“Fuck! I gotta go.” He turned to Mac. “We need to find Anna—*now!* I think Hump’s Old Lady is the woman who used to give her a lift home form PT.”

“You’re shitting me?” Mac said. “I talked to Vi, like half an hour ago, and she said Anna had called while she was in the middle of work.”

Which meant Vi hadn’t given her a lift home. Mitch pointed at Sisco to indicate that Mac needed to explain what was going on, and while he did, Mitch picked up his phone to call Anna. Her phone was turned off—which hardly ever happened. So he called Brett, but according to him, Anna’d left as usual, and he hadn’t seen her since. When Lisa didn’t pick up either, he turned to Sisco and Mac. They both nodded, and they all started walking towards their bikes while Mitch talked.

“Mac, go to the clinic, just to see what they say and wait there while I go to Lisa’s. Anna was going to call her, and she’s not picking up. She had a few days off this weekend, so I want to see if her car is there.” He noticed Sisco hesitating. “I don’t give a shit what it is you two are up to, but I need you.”

“That wasn’t it,” Sisco snarled. “Just... really think they’d hurt a pregnant woman?”

Mitch stopped dead in his tracks. “What?” He took a step towards Sisco. The guy looked sick. “You okay?”

“Yeah,” Sisco nodded. “We’ll find her.”

Mitch’s brain was going crazy while he was on his bike on the way to Lisa’s, but he exhaled when he noticed her car in the parking lot. At least they hadn’t taken both of them, and maybe she’d picked up Anna and they’d gone to Lisa’s for a

coffee or something. He ran up the stairs to her apartment and banged her door while pressing the doorbell at the same time.

“Lisa! Come on!”

“What the fuck?” she yelled when she opened the door. She wasn’t wearing anything but a robe, and her hair had an unmistakable fuck-mess to it. “What’s wrong?”

“Did Anna call you earlier? Is she here?”

“No. She’s not here.” Lisa looked confused, but she walked inside and started looking for the phone in her bag. “I didn’t hear the phone, but I’ll check it.”

“What’s going on, babe?” Mitch turned and stared at Chris, so apparently Lisa’d followed his advice. “Oh, uhm, hi.”

“She called, but I missed it.” Lisa looked at him with wide, terrified eyes. “What’s going on, Mitch?”

“Has she talked about that bitch who gives her a ride home?”

“Um.” He could see Lisa’s brain working; she was starting to look worried. She knew something was seriously wrong. “Anita, I think her name is.”

“And her man?”

“I don’t think she ever mentioned his name.”

“Know why he’s going there?” Sisco asked. “What’s wrong with him?”

“Not sure.” Tears were forming in her eyes. “Tell me what’s going on.”

“Was it his hand?” Mitch asked, completely ignoring her question. “Had he lost his hand?”

“Yes,” Lisa said, and looked even more scared. “In an accident. Some farm equipment...” She sobbed. “Who’s the guy, and where’s Anna?”

Mitch had never in his life experienced the kind of panic he felt at that moment. It was one thing to suspect something, but something completely different to have one’s worst

suspicious confirmed. It was Hump. He'd been close to Anna all this time. If he'd just fucking told Anna that they'd taken his hand, she would've known, but he never had, because... Because telling a woman who'd lost so much in accident that they'd done that on purpose to another guy... he hadn't been able to. And now her phone was off. She never turned off her phone. She might not answer if she was pissed at him, but she'd never turned it off before.

His legs went out from under him, and he landed on his knees.

"Come on," Sisco mumbled and knelt down next to him. "We'll get her."

That might be true, but what state would she be in when they did? What was Hump doing to her? The images that were flooding his mind crippled him. He couldn't think about anything else, his brain refused to switch track, and it was terrifying. It felt like a deep, dark hole, and he didn't know how to get out of it.

He felt a sharp slap on his cheek and was looking into Sisco's eyes.

"You are the smartest guy in this club, and we need you. You need to be on top of your game for us to pull this off. Focus. Your woman needs you, so use that head of yours."

"Okay," Mitch mumbled.

"I know we're all gonna follow you on this, so tell me what to do," Sisco continued. "Take a few deep breaths, and tell us what to do. That'll keep you grounded. Plan this out."

He nodded and tried to think about what they needed, what could lead them right.

"Send Dawg to talk to Brett, her therapist. Mac is already there, and have them give all the info to Mech so he can do a search. Bull needs to call Russ to get what else he has, and maybe he's got some Nomads close by that we can use when we find out where he's been living." Each sentence that came out of his mouth brought him back a little and gave him the next step. His breathing got easier as he went, too. "Wrench

needs to go get Irina so we can keep her safe. Mace should bring the other women in, just to be sure.”

“Good,” Sisco nodded. “Keep going. What are we doing? You and I.”

“We’re going back to the clubhouse. He’s going to reach out. He’ll want me to know that he’s got her.” He looked at Lisa. “Get dressed. You’re going there, too.”

The moment he’d said that, it was something to hang on to. Hump wouldn’t kill her yet, because he wanted Mitch to know he had her, and he was going to use her against him. It was a small silver lining, but it was something. He needed to focus on that, and try to push away the thoughts of the horrors Hump might be subjecting her to.

“Good.” And now Sisco was smiling. “Stay in this mode and we’ll get her home.”

Lisa was crying when she came back dressed with Chris next to her.

“I’m sorry,” she mumbled. “If I’d picked up...”

“It’s not your fault. Don’t think about it. Bring all the medical equipment you have, we might need it,” Mitch said and gave her a hug. He was pissed at her, he honestly was, but logically he knew it wasn’t her fault. “Get her to the clubhouse,” he said to Chris instead.

“I will,” he nodded and put an arm around her.

On his way back to the bike, he kept trying Anna’s phone, but it was still off. Sisco was on the phone, too, barking out orders, so that shit seemed to be moving at least. He tried to keep in mind what Sisco’d said, that he needed to stay on top of his game, panicking wouldn’t help Anna, but that panic was at the back of his head the entire time, and he wondered how long he’d be able to keep it at bay.

The answer came a lot faster than he’d expected, because Mech and Tommy met them when they arrived at the compound.

“He sent an email,” Mech said.

Mitch was afraid to ask and instead just clenched his jaws tighter, nodded, and followed Mech and Tommy inside. He held his breath when he moved closer to the computer, and when he made out what was on the screen, his mind blacked out again. It was Sisco's hand on his shoulder that brought him back.

“Still need you, kid. There are numbers in that email, and you need to tell us what they are.”

He took a few deep breaths, blinked a few times, and tried to block out the image of Anna, lying on her side on a concrete floor with a red rag in her mouth and hands tied together behind her back.

‘Happy Birthday’ the message said, along with ‘8/23, 11 A.M—Alone.’ August 23rd, his birthday, and he wondered if that had been the plan all along. To hound him for months and give him the final strike on his birthday. If they didn't find Anna before then, she'd be with Hump and his old lady for over twenty-four hours, and he could imagine a lot of things they could do to her in those twenty-four hours.

“You're slipping,” Sisco mumbled. “Focus.”

He nodded and looked at the other series of numbers on screen. “It's longitude and latitude,” he mumbled. “It's a place, and it's not far.”

“Tomorrow. So they're not gonna be there now,” Tommy said. “Can you get me a satellite image of that place?” he asked Mech.

Mitch turned his head and stared at Tommy. “What?”

“Former Scout Sniper, Recon Marines. You know, undercover ops, and shit like that,” he smiled. “Do your stuff, try to find her now, and I'll sort out tomorrow if it gets to that. Okay?”

He hesitated for a second. “It says alone. What if they see you?”

“They won't see me,” Tommy assured him. “Not a shot in hell that they will. I promise you.”

He decided to trust him, and nodded. “Okay. Let me know if you need anything.” He turned to Mech. “Set him up with Russ, too. He needs to know everything Russ knows.”

Mech nodded, and after a slight hesitation he came over and gave Mitch a hug. “We’ll get her.”

Sisco followed him outside where he was met up by Mac who was coming with Vi, Joshua, and April. He didn’t say anything, just caught Mitch in a long hug, before taking a step back.

“Where are we at?”

-o0o-

Dawg found out where Hump was living. The Nomads who went there said no one was home, but the place wasn’t emptied, so it didn’t look as if they’d planned on leaving permanently.

The Nomads left one guy close by, but he honestly thought it was a waste of manpower—Hump wasn’t going back there, but he wasn’t gonna start arguing with Russ about how he used his men.

They found no other property that could be connected to Hump or anyone close to him. They checked the name he’d apparently been using the last few years, but that came up empty, too. Mech started on a map, trying to calculate where he could be, given the time frame they were working in, but Mitch told him to stop. The area was way too fucking big for them to search anyway, and there was no telling if they were even in a mapped building. There were so many fucking old military bunkers and missile silos all around Arizona, there was no way they could search through them all.

They’d gone through the cameras and found Hump’s old Volvo, but it had turned into side road and was gone. He assumed they’d changed cars, and when Sisco and Bull searched the area, they found the empty car at a parking lot. Mech kept an eye on the scanners and police reports, but no reports on a stolen car had appeared yet. It wasn’t a priority thing, so it might take a while before something like that hit

the files. They also might have a car there waiting, which meant there wouldn't be any reports.

Finally, they'd gathered in the Chapel along with Russ and some of the Nomads. Mitch hated to fucking give up, and he had no idea how he'd be able to keep it together until the next day, but short of riding around hoping for some luck, they were screwed. There was no finding her until the next day.

“You're not going there alone,” Mac said.

“What if they see the rest of you and kill her immediately?”

Russ shook his head. “He wants his drop of blood, and he wants to torture you, so he's not gonna do it fast. And there are only two of them, they'll both be with her. They won't have any advance setup with lookouts or anything like that. We can keep out of the way but still be close by, and you'll need us there.”

Mitch's bleak thoughts about how he found it hard to believe that anything could torture him more than a dead Anna was interrupted when Tommy and Mace walked into the clubhouse.

“Good news?” he asked.

Tommy smiled and nodded. “It's not perfect, but it's doable.”

-000-

Mitch's legs were shaking when he walked into the abandoned house. He dreaded what was waiting for him in there, and when he saw Anna he took a deep breath. She was sitting on a chair with her wrists tied to the armrests and the same fucking red rag was still in her mouth. Her makeup was all over her face. She had some bruising, but that was the only visible injury he could see, and then she started crying when she saw him.

“Baby—“ he started and took a step towards her, but was interrupted when the bitch gave Anna a hard slap over her cheek. Anna tried to scream, but the rag muffled the sound.

“Every time to you talk to her directly, I’m gonna beat her. That clear?”

He looked at Anna when he was nodding. He needed to snap out of his shock, he needed to be alert to what was going on around him, but he wasn’t sure how to when she was just there, and she was in pain. He couldn’t get over the fact that it was his fault—all of it.

He’d spent the night going through the scenarios, and Sisco and Mac had been right there with him the entire time. Sisco seemed to be taking it personally, and when Mitch found out about him losing his wife when she was pregnant, he understood. This was personal to Sisco, as fucking personal as it got. His story hadn’t calmed Mitch down, but he’d known for sure he could trust Sisco through this—to the very end.

But to get a happy ending, he needed to focus, and he couldn’t look at Anna if he wanted to do that, so he turned to Hump. He’d been prepared for a lot of things, but not what he was seeing when he looked at Hump. The guy was not on top of his game, and Russ’s theory that this was something the crazy bitch had come up with started to ring more and more true to Mitch. Hump was a wreck, and despite the months of PT, he just barely seemed able to handle the gun with his left hand.

By instinct, Mitch took a few steps towards Anna. Hump was immediately there and slammed the gun over Mitch’s face. It wasn’t hard enough to break his nose, but it still hurt like hell, and while holding his face, blinking his tears away, he heard Anna screaming and another thump when the cunt hit her.

He looked at Hump through tear-filled eyes. “I’m here. Please let her go.”

“No,” Hump shook his head as he took a few steps away from Mitch. “I’m going to do what you did to me. I’m going to take everything from you and leave you like an empty fucking shell.”

There was hardly any point in trying to tell Hump that Mitch hadn’t taken anything from him. He’d done that pretty

fucking well himself, and he'd ended up killing his own blood while going after Mitch. If he was the one who had killed his own daughter, which Mitch had doubted to begin with. Looking at Hump and Anita now, he was getting more and more certain that it was on Anita, and he wondered if Hump even knew about it. Because while Hum looked like a broken man, Anita looked bat-shit crazy, and Mitch decided to test his theory.

“I wasn't the one who killed your daughter,” he said.

He heard a muffled bang, and despite the rag in her mouth, Anna managed to scream, and when he looked at her, Anita was standing with a gun to Anna's head and a hammer in her other hand. The end of the hammer was still resting against the back of Anna's hand.

“Oh God! Fuck!” Mitch screamed. “Please leave her alone!”

“One more lie from you, and I'm doing this to the knee on her good leg.”

When he took a step towards them, Anita raised the hammer into the air again and shook her head.

“Please,” he said, and he didn't even give a shit about the fact that he was bawling like a baby.

“Then back the fuck off.”

He took a step back again, and Anna was looking at him, crying with a horrible panic in her eyes. He wanted to comfort her, but even if he would be able to talk to her, he had no idea what he'd say. There was nothing to say. How the fuck could he ever make it up to her that she was kidnapped and a psycho bitch smashed her hand with a hammer? Her right hand. So she had a busted right hand and a left leg. At least the leg wasn't his fault, but if they got to work on her right leg, she'd end up in a fucking wheelchair because of him.

“What did you say about my daughter?” Hump yelled.

“You shut the fuck up!” Anita screamed at Mitch before the question was fully out in the open.

“No! *You* shut the fuck up!” Hump turned the gun against her while keeping an eye on Mitch. “Shut your fucking mouth. What the fuck did you do, bitch?! You didn’t think I’d lost enough?”

“*You*, it’s always about what *you* have lost. ‘Boo-hoo, poor me, I lost my club, and I lost my hand, I can’t ride,’” she said in a mocking tone, and if he hadn’t been so shocked, Mitch would’ve laughed. At the same time, he was trying to decide if the latest development was a good or bad thing, but as long as she had her gun pointed at Anna, he was leaning towards it still being pretty fucking bad. She wasn’t done, though. She kept screaming.

“You never, not for a fucking second thought about what I had lost, you self-centered piece of shit. You decided that we all needed to leave, and that we’d get revenge. I had to *live* with your moron ex-wife and your spoiled brat of a daughter, while you kept planning and planning, but you never actually did anything. *I* did it all. This is not your fucking revenge. It’s mine! So you just shut the fuck up about what I have or haven’t done. When this is over, I’m *done* with you!”

“You killed my ex-wife, too?”

“Don’t pretend like you give a shit,” she snarled, and she turned to Mitch. “You fucking men never get it. You think it’s all about you, but when you kicked him out of the club and his life, you kicked me out of my life, too. I paid the same price, and I bet you didn’t think about that for a second, but you’re gonna fucking learn how your shit spills over to the rest of your family.”

As Anita was yelling, she started to wave the gun around, and especially in Hump and Mitch’s direction, which was what Mitch needed. That was his shot to get out of this situation. He looked straight at Anita to make sure she kept her attention on him, and away from Anna. And when the gun was no longer aimed at her, he decided to try to keep it that way.

“Don’t see why it shouldn’t have spilled over to you. I bet you lived pretty fucking well off the money he stole, too.”

A shot went off, and for a terrible second, when he couldn't feel where he was hit, he wondered if she'd shot Anna, but the he registered that he was on the ground with a roaring pain going through his leg. She'd shot him, and while Anna was screaming, Hump and Anita were yelling at each other. Now her gun was moving between him and Hump, which as good, and he couldn't help to make a note of the absurdness and idiocy of the situation. They'd been executing their plan for months, and it had ended up in this pile of shit. If Anna hadn't been in the middle of two psychos with guns and a hammer, he might've laughed out loud.

Mitch looked up just as a whistling sound pierced through the air. It ended with a splat as the back of Anita's head exploded. Hump stared at her in surprise, but before he could even move there was a second whistling sound, and his surprised face rained over Anna. She sat perfectly still in shock for a few seconds, and then she started screaming and wrestling against her bindings.

"Babe, be careful, don't hurt yourself. It's over, just hang on." He tried to get up, and as much as it hurt, he managed to get over to her. "Honey." He pulled the rag out of her mouth. "Talk to me."

"Blood. Blood in my face."

"I'll get it." He tried to wipe the blood off her face while he was doing his best to not just break into a sobbing mess of relief. "I'm so sorry."

"Hurts."

"Give me a sec."

He turned around when he heard the door open, and Sisco, Mac, and Bull ran inside.

"Get her loose," he yelled.

Sisco pulled out a knife and cut off the ropes, and she basically fell into his arms. Anna was finally in his arms, and he hugged her tight.

"Water," she croaked.

Mac handed him a bottle, and Mitch opened it for her. It didn't look like she could use even her good hand, so she'd probably been tied up for a while. He held up the bottle in front of her.

"Take it easy, honey. Not too much."

"Hurts."

"The hand? We'll get that taken care of." They should get her to a hospital to make sure it was properly fixed. He didn't want to take any chances with any more of her limbs. "I'll get it sorted."

"No. Stomach. It's cramping."

"Oh, fuck!" Sisco muttered. "Is she's in labor?"

"Yes," Anna said and nodded after a few more sips of water. "I think so."

"Where did the first shot hit?" Bull asked.

"My leg."

"You can't go the hospital with a bullet in your leg and a girlfriend that looks like that."

"She needs to go to the hospital."

"I'm not questioning that, I'm just saying that you can't go with her."

"She's in labor."

"You can't go," Bull said firmly and shook his head, and he must've noticed Mitch being about to protest and cut him off before he had the chance. "There's a good chance that slug comes from the same gun as the one who the killed the other women."

Mitch looked at Anna; she had bruises on her face and on her arms. Bull was right. If he came into the hospital with that slug in his leg there would be hell to pay, and not only because of what Anna looked like.

Anna stroked his cheek. "I don't want to go alone."

“You’re not going alone,” Mac said and squatted down next to them. “I’ll go with you. Think you’d be okay with me until Mitch is done? They’ll pull that slug out, patch him up, and then he’ll be there.”

“It won’t be long,” Mitch tried to assure her. “I promise.”

She nodded hesitantly and tears kept falling down her cheeks, and Mitch wiped them away. He had to ask, he didn’t want to, but he had to ask her what they’d done to her.

“What did they do to you?” he mumbled.

“Beat me up,” she mumbled, and she started sobbing. “She kicked me. I think she kicked Sprout, too.”

Mitch wished they’d figured out a way to get her out of this without killing them fast, but the Tommy’d set it up so he could get them through one of the windows. Mitch had known that was the best way to do it, and the fastest way to get Anna the fuck out of there. He stroked Anna’s belly and tried to feel Sprout move.

“She’ll be fine. She’s a fighter,” he tried to assure her, and himself, before he turned to Mac. “Think you can carry her?”

Mac nodded and carefully put his hand on Anna’s shoulder. “You okay with that?”

“Yes.”

“Where does it hurt most?”

“My back right now.”

“I’ll be careful,” Mac assured her and carefully lifted her up.

“I’ll help you, kid,” Sisco said and pulled Mitch off the floor. “I’ve called Lisa. April and her are waiting for you.”

When they walked outside, he saw Tommy come walking with an M40 rifle over his shoulder. Even if it had taken him a while to pull the fucking trigger, Mitch knew that he owed Tommy a lot. It had been his setup; he’d really pulled through, and he gave Tommy a hug.

“I had to move to get a better shot, I’m sorry.”

“You did good,” Mitch mumbled. “Don’t sweat it. This would’ve been a lot fucking harder if it hadn’t been for you. I owe you, man.”

Tommy looked at Anna who was put in the van by Mac. He pointed at her questioningly.

“She’s in labor,” Bull explained. “Mac’s taking her to delivery, and I’m taking Mitch to the clubhouse so we can dig out the slug before he goes to the hospital.”

Mitch watched the van leave, and he wondered how screwed he was—again. She hadn’t seemed angry, but he figured that could change once she was over the shock.

“Gotta say,” Bull said when he started them towards the other van. “Brick was right.”

“About what?” he groaned, as he tried to get inside. Once Anna was gone he’d noticed how fucking bad his leg was aching.

“Thought he was full of shit when he said you’ll make a good president, but when shit went down, you were on top of it all. Might not feel like it now, but you did good. Really fucking good, and I’m impressed.”

“Thanks.” He couldn’t think of anything else to say. He didn’t think he’d ever heard Bull give anyone that kind of praise. “Speaking of Dad...”

“I’ll handle it. Get that slug out and go see your baby girl. I’ll take care of the rest.”

Mitch just hoped his baby girl was okay.

My Hand?

-o0o-

Everything was hurting, but my back was the absolute worst, and I had a hard time figuring out what were contractions and what was due to the fact that I'd been tied up and sleeping on a concrete floor—or the beatings, but I didn't want to think about those.

Then another contraction hit me. It was bad, and I wasn't wondering about the difference between the pains anymore.

“Oh hell! Oh, this is bad, you need to drive faster!” I yelled at Mac.

“This would be a good time to start with proper cussing,” Mac chuckled. “Focus on your breathing, keep it rhythmical.”

He demonstrated, and I had completely forgotten about all that breathing they'd tried to teach. For a second, I was glad that it was Mac who was with me, because I didn't think Mitch would've been as calm as Mac was right then.

“Good,” he said with an approving nod when I started doing as he'd asked.

When the contraction subsided, I let go of my grip of the door handle. “How bad do you think it was?”

“Mitch?” he asked and I nodded. “Not too bad. Lisa and April will fix it. Don't worry about it. Focus on this.”

I closed my eyes, and soon I felt another contraction.

“Shit,” Mac muttered when he noticed. “They're really fucking close.”

“Don't stress me!”

“Sorry, but they are, I need to step on it. What's the name of your doc, Anna?”

“Magda Boyarov,” I answered. “Why?”

“Means I got the info I need. Just do your stuff, and I’ll handle the rest.”

I’d never loved Mac more than I did at that moment. He’d take care of things, and that’s all I needed to know—I shut the world out.

The only thing I could focus on for the rest of the drive was my breathing, and keeping the pain at bay to the best of my ability. I’d thought I was getting pretty good at that, but nothing could’ve prepared me for this kind of pain. At the same time, in the middle of all the shit and all the things that had happened, this was a good kind of pain, a pain with a good purpose. I’d never hated being sore from training or my feet hurting, because it was something that came from training, and it meant I was getting better. But this was an even better pain, because it meant Sprout was on her way. She might be a little early, but I didn’t think it was any big risk, since I was in week thirty-seven. It should be okay.

While I kept telling myself that it should be okay, I couldn’t help thinking about Anita and how she’d kicked me. I’d thought it was bad when she kicked my bad leg, but the terror when she kicked my stomach had been worse. I’d tried to protect it with my arms as well as I could, and once they’d left me alone, I’d cried in relief when I felt Sprout move. But she’d kicked me again. When it happened the first time, it had been such a shock. I couldn’t believe that a person I’d been chatting with for months, all of a sudden had started hurting me. It seemed so foreign to me, a behavior I couldn’t understand, and didn’t want to understand.

The thoughts stopped once the next contraction hit me. I kept my eyes closed and imagined the air going in and out of me—down to the lungs, through my body, and out again. The next time I took notice about anything but my breaths and the pain was when I felt a hand on my arm.

“Come on, we’re here.” Mac put an arm around my waist and pulled my arm over his shoulders. “This okay?”

I nodded while breathing. Even if I wasn't mid-contraction, I was still in some pain, so I kept it up. Mac pretty much carried me inside, and from somewhere far away, I could hear him screaming at people. He seemed to get them going, so I kept shutting things out. I did hear one thing, though, and it was Doctor Boyarov's voice.

"A bit early, Miss Dobronravov," she chuckled. "Open your eyes."

I did, and she gave me a stiff nod. I noticed I was in a bed, but before I had time to wonder how that had happened, she spoke up again.

"The gentleman who brought you here is waiting outside. He said you'd been in an accident, but I didn't want him in here until I'd had a talk with you in private. Who is he?"

"Mitch's brother, and I'd like to have him with me. At least until Mitch gets here. I don't want to be alone."

"Okay." She turned her head and nodded to a nurse. "You're almost fully dilated, so you'll soon feel a need to push, but you don't push until I say it's okay."

Mac turned up next to me, and he took my good hand in his.

"My hand?" I asked Doctor Boyarov.

"We've called a specialist, but one thing at a time. Let's get this girl out first, and we worry about the other things later, because she's not waiting." She turned to the nurse. "Get everyone ready. This is happening fast."

I didn't like the sound of that, and I stared at Mac who looked as worried as I felt.

"Don't leave me," I whispered. I was terrified of being left alone.

"Not going anywhere," he assured me. "I'll be right here until you tell me differently or until Mitch comes and kicks me out."

"Thank you."

“Nothin’ to it,” he smiled and stroked the hair out of my face. “We’re family, and he’d do the same for me.”

“I’m scared,” I whispered low enough for only he to hear me.

“I know,” he nodded. “It’s gonna be fine, and before this day is over you’ll have a baby girl—born on the same day as her dad. He’s getting the best birthday present anyone can get.”

I smiled. “I hadn’t thought of that,” I said, just as I felt the next contraction coming, and now I wanted to push. My entire body was screaming at me to push, and I looked at the doctor. “Can I?”

“No!” she barked. I felt her hand between my legs, and I tried to relax, but it felt impossible. “Almost there.”

“Please,” I groaned. “I can’t.”

Something she did hurt like hell, and I screamed, at the same time she yelled, “Now.”

And I pushed.

The last thing I remembered was her voice when she screamed, “We need blood.”

-o0o-

I opened my eyes, and it was so terribly hard. The next thing I noticed was the pain surging through my body. When I moaned, I felt a hand on mine, and once I managed to focus my eyes, I noticed Mitch on a chair next to my bed.

“Mitch,” I croaked.

“Hey,” he leaned closer and stroked my cheek before resting his lips against my temple. “You’re back.”

“What happened?”

“I’m not sure exactly, but you lost a lot of blood. I think they said it was placenta abruption.”

“Probably because of the kicks.”

“Probably. According to the doc, it had been bleeding for a while, which might have been some of the reason for your back pain. They sedated you, but they said you’d be fine.” He choked and leaned his forehead to mine. “I’m so sorry. I don’t know what else to say, but I’m so sorry, babe.”

“The baby?”

“She’s fine. They needed to check up on her, since she’s a bit early, but they said she’d be fine, too.” He sighed when I put my hand on his cheek. “We’ll all be fine.”

“How are you?”

“Better than you are.”

“Mitch,” I warned him. “Tell me.”

“They got the slug, and Lisa stitched me up. I’ll hobble along next to you for a while, though.” He looked up, and there were still tears running down his cheeks. “I’m sorry.”

“It wasn’t your fault. I didn’t listen to you, and they got to me.”

“They would’ve gotten to you anyway, honey, so you did nothing wrong. Nothing at all. I’m sure this was set up to happen on my birthday, so they would’ve gotten to you anyway.” He turned his head and kissed my palm. “And it was my fault.”

“No,” I shook my head. “It wasn’t, so don’t say that. Have you seen her?” I wanted us think about Sprout—or Alma. Since she was born, she was Alma now.

“No,” he smiled. “They were in here about five minutes ago and said she’d be here soon.”

“Did Mac see her?”

“No. When you started bleeding they pushed him out of the room. He wanted me to let you know you picked a bitch doctor, and I’d be pissed, but one of the other doctors said it would’ve been a lot worse if she hadn’t been there. She patched you up well.”

“My hand?”

“They brought in some specialist while they had you sedated to fix you up, and he said there won’t be any permanent damage. It might take a while, but no major nerve damage, they fixed some tendons or something... I’m not sure, baby, but they said it should heal up nicely, and he’ll come and talk to you later today.” He sobbed and I pulled him closer to me again. “I’m so sorry.”

“Honey, it wasn’t your fault,” I tried again.

“No matter what you say, it was. This wouldn’t have happened if...” He shook his head.

“It wouldn’t have happened if I never met you, but that’s really the only way to have avoided it, and that’s not something I’m sorry about. We have a girl we’re about to see, so please don’t. Don’t ruin this by saying we shouldn’t have met.”

“Okay, but I’m still sorry.” He sighed. “Thirsty? They said you might be thirsty.”

“Yes.” I watched him stand up to get a pitcher, and when he walked he definitely had a limp. “It’s pretty sexy.”

“What?” he turned around and it was the first smile he’d given me since I woke up.

“The limp. It’s pretty sexy.”

“I know,” he smiled. “But I’m glad you noticed. Now you know one of the reasons I find you hot as fuck.”

He held a glass with a straw in front of me, and I couldn’t help notice the way he studied me.

“Something wrong?” I asked and returned back to the straw. I was really thirsty.

“I’m just... I’m glad you’re not angry, and I’m wondering if it’ll last or if you’re gonna get angry with me soon.”

“Mom warned me that women always pay the price of men’s deeds. No matter how I feel about Anita, she was right about that, and you didn’t think about it. You thought it was Hump, because it never occurred to you that he wasn’t the only one whose life you destroyed.”

“And you paid the price for *that*,” he mumbled.

“That was the point with her plan,” I whispered and pulled him closer. “But it’s not just about paying. I’m getting things, too—good things. Don’t forget that.”

“Okay. I love you.”

The door opened before I had time to answer, and a nurse came in pushing a clear bassinet in front of her. In it was a pink bundle.

“I’m glad you’re awake,” she smiled at me. “You don’t wanna miss this little miracle.”

I reached out my hands and managed to completely ignore the soaring pain in my back; I just wanted to hold my girl. The nurse picked her up with a big smile and took a step towards me.

And then I had her.

“Welcome, Alma,” I mumbled and held her closer.

I couldn’t take my eyes off her. She was the most beautiful baby I’d ever seen. I pushed the blanket further out of the way to see her entire face. Mitch reached and carefully pulled off her tiny pink hat, and we both chuckled. She had thick, black hair—a lot of it.

“That’s gonna kill Mac,” he whispered, and I felt him sit down next to me on the bed.

“You’re an ass,” I laughed.

“She’s perfect.” He gave my shoulder a kiss. “So perfect.”

“You need to keep an eye on her,” the nurse smiled. “It’s not uncommon for premature children to have jaundice. It’ll show in a day or two. There are no real risks involved, but it’s important to keep an eye on it anyway.”

I could only nod, but still refused to stop looking at her.

“Any other risks, since she was born early?” Mitch asked.

“She was almost in week 37, and it’s just one week from what we consider within the normal range, so I’d say there’s

no need to worry at all.”

She left us, and we sat in silence and just stared at Alma, and suddenly I couldn't hold back anymore and sobbed.

“She's beautiful.”

I couldn't stop myself and stroked her little lips with my thumb before continuing up over her incredibly soft cheek. Her lips tensed into a sour face, and we both laughed. She had tiny tufts of hair at the top of her ears and Mitch chuckled when he noticed. We'd both stared at her for a really long time when she opened her eyes with a mewl and a stretch, and we both drew our breath. She had bright blue irises with a dark outer ring.

“Amazing.”

“We did a good job,” Mitch laughed and gave me a kiss. Alma started crying. “Think she wants to be fed.”

“I'm not sure how to do this,” I admitted.

“She probably does, just put her at the right spot and it'll solve itself. Hopefully.”

He helped and made sure to cover the cast on my hand with a pillow, and then she was there, right at my breast. It seemed like Mitch had been right, when she was in the right spot, she opened her mouth and started. I wasn't sure if she was getting anything, but they'd told me it might be a bit tricky in the beginning.

“That's kind of hot,” Mitch said.

“Eww,” I laughed.

He looked at me and his facial expression changed to a slightly tormented one again.

“I'm sorry,” he said. I didn't answer and pulled him closer for a kiss. He would keep saying that no matter what I said to him. “I can't help thinking that... I almost lost you both.”

“You didn't,” I mumbled. “I'd say that under the circumstances, I'm excused for not having bought you a birthday gift.”

“I’ll have the perfect gift every fucking year from now on. My girl will get one year older with me.” He took a shaky breath and I turned to look at him. “You better not tell anyone I cried.”

“Never,” I smiled and leaned over to give him another kiss. “Your secret is safe with me. Don’t think they’d blame you for it, though. It’s been a pretty intense day.”

“No shit.”

“Are the others waiting for you and her?”

“Yeah, but they can wait. She’s feeding, and I think we’ve deserved a little time alone.” He stroked his hand over her head. “Does this mean your tits are off limits for me until she’s done with them permanently?”

“No, might have to be a little careful with them, though.”

“I can try,” he smiled. “Think you can make more room for me in the bed, or would that hurt?”

I moved over, and he helped me the best he could. It meant my breast slipped out of Alma’s mouth, and she wailed in protest.

“Impressive lungs,” I noted. “Strong lungs and clenched fist—she’s a fighter, and she’ll be fine,” I said and carefully stroked her hand once the nipple was back in her mouth.

Mitch was right next to me, and while I watched Alma, I could feel him relax next to me. Five minutes later, he was sleeping, and I decided that the others could wait a while longer. I was sure they’d understand.

-o0o-

When I woke up the next time, Mitch was back on the chair next to the bed, and he had Alma in his arms.

“Are they still waiting?” I asked, and he smiled.

“No. I’ve been there. Mac was totally jealous about her hair.” He looked very pleased. I laughed and tried to turn to my side, which hurt like hell. “Fuck, babe,” he mumbled.

“Don’t tell me you’re sorry again,” I muttered. “You should’ve told me about his hand. If you’d just told me that...”

“I know. I should’ve told you about a lot of things. I think I didn’t want to tell you that we’d done that on purpose to someone.” He looked at Alma, and it was clearly an attempt to avoid looking at me. “It’s one thing that you know we’re... not exactly legal, but another to give you details about how we deal with things.”

“I didn’t really want to know, either,” I admitted. “But I think I need to know things from now on.”

“I know. I’ll tell you. I’d say you’ve seen the worst already.”

“I’m guessing this isn’t the end of it. It was just one guy and... Like, Amsterdam, what’s going on there, and what do I need to worry about regarding that?”

He chuckled. “I’m not even sure I know myself what we need to worry about as far as Amsterdam goes. There’s going to be a lot of things going on in the club for a while.”

“Things like this?”

“No. Not things like this, not guys who are out to hurt me, but there’s always gonna be people who might be out to hurt the club.” He finally looked at me, and he gave me a wobbly smile. “I think you knew that, though.”

“I knew it, but it’s one thing to know and another to experience.” I reached out, and he took my hand. “I’ll never lie to you, and I’m scared, and you need to tell me things. A lot more than you have.”

“We’re setting up a deal with the Dutch, and part of the deal is that we’re going to expand. Start new clubs,” he explained, and it sounded like he just wanted everything out in the open. So, when he kept talking, I stayed quiet. “Eventually, that could lead to problems. A lot of problems, but we’re all going to be on high alert, and we’re gonna be quick to bring everyone in to a lockdown.”

“What’s that?”

“We bring everyone to the clubhouse, post guards, and keep them there until we’ve dealt with the problem, whatever the problem is.”

“And you’ll keep me informed about all of it?”

“All of it,” he nodded. “Every nasty detail. I’m not making this mistake again. I’ll keep you fully informed, and I’ll tell you who to talk to when I’m not around, too. Dad, probably. I’d say he’s the first one you talk to if I’m not around.”

“I’d like that. Maybe not the knowing everything part, but I’d like to be able to talk to your dad.”

Mitch chuckled. “I have no idea how the old fucker does it, but every young woman in the club loves talking to him and trusts him.”

“He’s got that thing about him,” I admitted with a laugh.

He looked at Alma. “We’ll get through this.” He leaned down and gave her a kiss. “Won’t we, Cupcake?”

I looked at him, and I was fascinated with the look on his face when he looked at Alma. He’d keep her safe. It was probably odd that I thought that while my back and leg were aching from the kicks I’d received by people who’d done it just to punish Mitch, but I still believed it. We’d both learned our lesson, and if it meant I’d be more able to keep Alma safe, it was worth it.

-o0o-

“Cupcake’s hungry,” Mitch whispered next to my ear.

It had been a week, and my body was still aching, but Mitch had been amazing. It was probably still due to guilt. It didn’t matter what I said, he still kept telling me how sorry he was, and did everything he could to help me. I was grateful, though, because my back was still a mess, and my hand was in a cast, which made it really tricky to use the cane. I had to hold it in the ‘wrong’ hand, but I was starting to figure that out.

The most amazing gift I received at the hospital had been from Sisco and Bull. They gave my cane back to me. I’d

thought I'd lost it, but they'd found it in the car Anita had dumped at a parking lot. I'd cried until Bull eventually turned bright red of embarrassment, but I hadn't understood until that moment how much it meant to me. Apparently they had, and just thinking about those two big bikers having had the thought that I should get it back choked me up. It was such a sweet thing to do.

"I didn't even hear her wake up," I mumbled to Mitch and laid Alma next to me.

"I was up, so I'd taken the baby monitor to the office." He lay down behind me with an arm around us both. "She's changed and ready for food. And for the record, she might be cute as hell, but her poo is a biohazard."

"Yes, it is," I laughed.

"And I swear to God, she looks totally pleased when she's had a dump and you open the diaper."

"Sadistic little kid."

I was slumbering a little. It felt okay, since Mitch was there to take her back to her bed when she was done. People kept telling me there wasn't really any danger that you'd accidentally roll over on a baby next to you, but I still didn't like to sleep when she was in bed with us. She protested when the breast was empty, and I turned us over. That way we were facing Mitch, and he smiled at me.

"How's the back?"

"It's okay. It's getting better. Probably because you're spoiling me. Not sure what I'll do when you get back to work."

"Not gonna happen in a while. Dad's already told me to take whatever time I need. There might be some club stuff, but for now they're in agreement that we've earned some time together." He stroked my cheek. "And they know you need help."

"I do," I admitted.

“The other Old Ladies will help you once I go back to work, too. So don’t be afraid to ask them.”

“You know I was so eager to get you involved in this because I knew I would need help, so I’m gonna ask for help.”

“That the only reason?” he asked with a laugh.

“Definitely.”

“Sure,” he mumbled and leaned over to give me a kiss. “Guess there’s no point in asking you to marry me then?”

“What?”

He smiled. “Marry me, Gimp.”

“Did you seriously called me Gimp when you asked me to marry you?!”

“Sure did. When that cast is gone and you’re fit for it, think you’d walk down the aisle for me?” He kissed me instead of waiting for an answer. “I’ll buy you a white cane.”

“And a Russian wedding dress?”

“Yup.”

“Pavlova cake?”

“Absolutely.”

“Just so you know, Russian weddings go on for days.”

“I think that’ll be very popular among bikers, then,” he laughed. “Is that a yes?”

“That’s a yes,” I confirmed. “You get points for how you asked even if you called me Gimp.”

“Yeah. I figured going down on my knee and make a big spectacle of it would just make you uncomfortable.”

“Maybe a little,” I admitted. “But I would’ve said yes no matter how you asked.”

EPILOGUE

No Whistling

-o0o-

Mitch came home late, and the apartment was dark, so he assumed Anna had gone to sleep. She'd been tired lately.

He slipped into Alma's room first, and chuckled a little at her dance clothes that were neatly folded on the chair next to her bed. She was very ready for her performance tomorrow. She was five years old, and already took it so seriously. He'd been forced to give up his office the year before, and had taken over the nursery instead. It was smaller, but it still worked, and he wasn't really complaining. After all, he'd always known it would happen.

He leaned over the bed and stroked her long, dark hair out of the way to give her a kiss.

"Daddy?"

"Yeah, Cupcake. I just wanted to kiss you goodnight."

"Are you coming tomorrow?"

"Already told you I will. I'll go home from work early, so we'll be in time for it. I promise." He gave her another kiss. "Go back to sleep."

"Night. Love you." She'd said those words since she was two, and he still felt his heart tighten every fucking time, and he couldn't hear it enough.

"Love you more."

He pulled the cover higher up, and watched her snuggle it around her, just like her mom always did. Alma was like a little miniature Anna in so many ways, she even looked just like her, but she had his dark brown eyes. The blue had disappeared and turned to brown before her first birthday.

He went into the bathroom for a quick shower, and continued into the bedroom. Anna was sleeping, and he slipped into the bed behind her. He carefully stroked her still-flat belly. His second kid was in there. They'd just found out the week before.

"Hey," she mumbled and turned around to throw her leg over him. "How's my man?"

"I'm fine. How's my woman?"

"Very good."

She started spinning the big white gold ring he had on his left hand like she often did. She liked it there, and he got that because he fucking loved seeing the rings on her finger and the ink on her scarred left leg—*his* leg, as she tended to call it now. Vi'd groaned about it, but had managed to find a spot with not much scarring where she could put the ink. They'd argued about a lot of things regarding the wedding, the rings, and even the ink, but not where the Old Lady tattoo was going. It was obvious to them both that it should be on her injured leg—the very reason she was with him. They'd gotten married when Alma was a year, and Alma had been waiting with him at the end of the aisle. He'd bought Anna a white and silver cane with Russian flower patterns to go with her Russian-inspired wedding dress. It was slightly taller than her regular one so she could wear high heels, and she still used it sometimes. He'd told her he didn't want her to feel like a hunchback, and that she should be able to wear high heels when she felt like it. He honestly didn't give a damn about what she was wearing; if he it had been up to him, she'd be naked all the time.

He stroked Anna's back for a while, before moving his hand further down, into her panties, and in between her legs.

"Any chance I can get you going?"

"Never been a time when you couldn't," she smiled and kissed his throat.

He gently moved her over to her back and kissed his way down to her breasts. After carefully circling both her nipples

with his tongue, his fingers found the nub between her legs. He gave his fingertips a quick lick, and started to stroke it. He was already semi-hard. Once again, the thought of Anna being pregnant with his baby seemed to turn him on, and he assumed she'd been right when she'd said it was some caveman reaction to her carrying his offspring. He didn't care, and he really hoped she'd be as horny this time around when she hit the second trimester, because that had been just fantastic.

When he felt her getting wet, he dipped his fingers into her opening, and with his thumb still teasing her clit, he started to move two fingers in and out of her slowly. He loved feeling her wet and swollen insides around his fingers, knowing that he'd get his dick in there soon.

“Mitch,” she moaned.

“Yeah, babe? Is that good?”

“Yes...” she pushed her hips against him and tried to grind herself against his hand. “Don't stop.”

With a chuckle, he leaned over her and caught her mouth in a deep kiss, while still playing with his hand between her legs. She was rapidly getting wetter, and he felt her seeping over his hand.

“I won't, if you tell me you love me.”

“Extortion,” she laughed, but the laugh was interrupted when he curled his fingers and hit her spot. She arched and panted. “Shit. I love you.”

“How much?” he asked and curled his fingers again.

“Very, very much. Please, I'm close.”

He moved down and she spread her legs further. He wanted to get her over the edge so they could take their time afterwards, so he quickly and determinately sucked her clit in between his teeth, and ran his tongue over it. At the same time, he pumped his fingers into her, making sure he kept hitting her spot.

“God!” she panted, and when she once again arched, he put his other arm over her hips to pin her down. “What are you

doing?”

He let go of her clit for just enough time to reply. “I’m getting you off.”

She should know what that meant. If he started by getting her off quickly, she knew they’d be in for a long one. It was basically a three-orgasm guarantee for her. He felt her coming around his finger while he kept his mouth over her clit.

“Let go,” she hissed, and he did, but kept his fingers inside her. He slowed down the tempo, though, and moved up to give her a kiss. “One of those nights, then?” she asked with a smile.

“Unless you mind. I can quick fuck you if you prefer that.”

“No. Should probably take the chance to do this before Grain starts messing up my back and leg.”

‘Grain’ was the second kid, and that had been Anna’s name for it. He liked it, though; it was in line with sprout, but its own name. Each kid should have its own nickname, whether it was inside her or already born. He couldn’t call this little one Sprout anymore than he could’ve called it Alma once it was born. But she was right, they should make a decent round through their fuck repertoire before Grain got bigger inside of her.

“Any requests?” he asked as he continued down the side of her neck.

“Fuck me.”

Anna using the word fuck was not a common occurrence, but he knew he was in for a good night when she did. He got up on his knees between her knees and spread her legs to the sides. She looked stunning like that, and he gave her a smile.

He teased the tip of his dick against her opening, still sitting straight up to be able to take her in her stunning appearance. When she gently tipped her head back in a long exhale, Mitch groaned.

“Fuck, baby, you are so beautiful.”

He kept moving in and out of her slowly, running his hand over her body as far as he could reach without leaning

forward. He wanted to see himself go in and out of her. It worked until she got impatient and sat up, holding him tightly, and started to ride him, but she kept up the slow pace. It was more that he got deeper inside her in that position.

“I love you,” she whispered close to his ear before giving the side of his neck a nibble.

With a groan, he grabbed her butt cheeks and started to pull her down over him harder, raising his hips as he did to reach all the way and feel her around his entire dick.

“I love you, too.”

He loved having her on his lap because she always held him hard, and she felt so fucking good so close to him. When she leaned her head back, he felt the tip of her braid against his hand, and he quickly reached for it and pulled out her hairband. She almost always had her hair up, and Mitch took every shot he got to let it loose and run his hands through it.

When he did it this time, she leaned back and helped him undo the braid. While she did, he teased her nipples and watched her, and he couldn't help the big smile when her hair fell over her shoulders. She put her hands on his cheeks and leaned closer while slowly starting to roll her hips again.

“Better?” she asked.

“Yes,” he nodded and wrapped a thick strain of hair around his hand. “Much better,” he added and gave her a long kiss.

“Wait,” she panted and got up from him. He groaned in protest when he slipped out of her, but smiled when he realized what she was doing. She was turning around and sat down on his lap with her back against him. “Help me.”

He grabbed his dick and steered into her, and then held on to her breast while letting the other hand seek its way between her legs again.

“Think this was one of the positions you were very fond of last time I knocked you up.”

“It was,” she agreed in a heavy breath. “Thought we could get some practice.”

“Smart girl.” He gave her cheek a kiss when she leaned the back of her head on his shoulder and started to move again.

They took it slowly, but soon he couldn't hold back, and pushed her over to her stomach. With firm grip around her shoulders to hold her in place, he fucked her, pounded into her and closed his eyes to feel her tightening around him, pulsating.

“Fuck, baby. Come with me.”

“Almost there,” she panted.

He clenched his jaws and tried to not feel how fucking awesome she felt for a few seconds to give her time, but it had always been so fucking hard to hold back when he was with her because it was always so good.

“Shit,” he groaned and reached down underneath her to find her clit. He had to. That in combination with talking to her should get her over the edge. “Damn you're so fucking hot, babe. Always feel so good.” He gave her jawline a quick lick before pressing his lips against it.

“Keep talking. I love when you talk to me.”

“Not sure I can,” he groaned. “If I keep thinking of how fucking hot you are, I'm gonna cum.”

In a moan, she turned her face away from him and pressed it into the mattress, and he felt the ripples along his dick, and he came too. His hips slammed against her until he'd spilled each and every drop inside of her.

They lay still, the only movement coming from them was when they tried to catch their breath, until he rolled down next to her. He took her right hand and gave the scars on top of it a kiss—the scars that were his fault even if she never let him say that out loud.

“Love you,” he mumbled with his lips still against it.

“Good, because I love you.” She turned towards him. “Was she sleeping?”

Anna knew he always checked on Alma when he came home. Even if he even normally had problems with sleeping, it

was completely impossible for him to fall asleep before he'd made sure that his baby girl was okay. The fact that Anna had been taken hadn't really dawned on him until Alma was around a year and a half, and he'd realized that someone could try again. Lisa had said it was a delayed shock, delayed probably because just after, they'd both been so wrapped up in the fact that their beautiful baby girl had been born.

It hadn't lasted long, most likely because Anna had taken his total paranoia pretty well, and she'd never commented on the fact that he'd called her three times a day with completely made-up excuses. After a few months it passed, but some things were still there, and one of them was that he had to make sure Alma was okay before he had a shot in hell to fall asleep. Whenever Anna and Alma were in Spain to visit Anna's parents, he simply stayed at the clubhouse, basically drinking himself to sleep.

"Yeah. She woke up for a few seconds, but went right back to sleep. Did she have trouble falling asleep?"

"A little. She's very eager about tomorrow." Anna leaned over and gave him a kiss. "Make sure you come home in time."

"I will." He pulled her closer. "You should go back to sleep, Gimp. I'd say I'm sorry I woke you up, but I'm really not."

"Neither am I," she smiled. "And you said it wouldn't be a quick fuck."

"It wasn't." Mitch was a bit offended, he thought it had been pretty fucking thorough, but he laughed when he got it. "You want more."

"Maybe, so talk to me a while longer, and we'll see if you can get it up again."

"If I get it up again?" he asked and pushed her to her back. "You're gonna pay for that doubt."

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It wasn't common that Mitch took Alma to her ballet classes. Most of the time, parents weren't even allowed to stay

and watch, but this time they were, and he and Anna made sure to always see every one of Alma's performances. The difference this time was that Anna couldn't come. She had a doctor's appointment she hadn't been able to move, so he'd told her it was important that she went, and that he'd go with Alma himself. She'd still hesitated until he told her he'd like the shot at doing this with her alone this time, and that had made Anna agree. He liked doing things alone with Alma now and then, some quality Daddy-Daughter time, and he thought this could be a good thing.

He'd made sure to come home in time for a quick shower and to change clothes. Alma had been very stressed, and she'd pointed out several times during breakfast what time she had to be there. Apparently, Anna was the one who always made sure they came in time to things, and Alma didn't really trust him with this.

He found his two girls in the practice room. Anna was sitting on the floor next to Alma. They often had these rehearsals at home. Anna'd been nervous about them, but she'd quickly realized that at this level, she could definitely train Alma.

"It's beautiful, honey," she said and put her hand at the small of Alma's back, and her fingertips under her chin. Alma had a ballerina dress with a big pink tutu and a pink ribbon in her hair. "Forward here, and up there, and a big smile. Just like that!"

"Do I look as pretty as you did, Mama?"

"Much prettier."

"Think Daddy'll like it?"

"I know he will."

"Did he ever see you dance?"

"No. You know I met daddy after the accident."

That was another thing Anna had managed to work herself up about when Alma was younger—how she should tell her about the accident and why she couldn't dance anymore. It had never even been an issue. Alma had asked Anna about her leg

and her cane, and that's when they'd told her. In general, everything about dance and the accident had turned into a non-issue for Anna the last three or four years. She loved her job, she still loved to go to see a ballet even if he rarely went with her anymore, she talked about it all the time, too—since it was her job—but it never made her sad anymore. Which was good, because Alma *loved* watching recordings of her mommy dancing.

“Actually, I have seen it—on film,” Mitch said and walked into the room. “You ready to go, Cupcake?”

“Yes!” She ran towards him and jumped up in his arms. “I’m not a cupcake.” For some reason, her nickname had started bothering her the last few weeks, and he was teasing her a little about it.

“You sure? You look like a cupcake with pink frosting—just the way I like them.” He walked over to Anna and helped her up from the floor while still talking to Alma. “I might accidentally eat you up on our way to your class.”

“You’re so silly,” she giggled.

“Yeah, but you knew that.”

“Take pictures,” Anna said, and he could tell how much she hated missing one of Alma’s performances. “Promise me.”

“Every second. I’ll call you when we’re on our way to Dad’s.”

Alma seemed about as worried as Anna about her not being there, and kept giving Mitch instructions.

“You have to applaud when the other girls are dancing, too, Daddy.”

“Okay, but I’m gonna applaud louder when it’s you,” he said.

“And no whistling. Grandpa did that once, the other moms got really angry with him.”

“I won’t whistle,” Mitch laughed.

That would explain why Alma didn't want Brick to come this time around. She'd only wanted him with her. Anna kept reminding him about taking pictures, and he assured her that he was aware of how the camera on his phone was working. Eventually he shut her up with a deep, wet kiss, and told her again that he'd call her when they were on their way to Brick and Mel's. He took the regular cage, since Alma thought the truck was a little embarrassing, and the first three minutes, she managed to stay calm, and then she started to worry again.

“Did you bring my bag?”

“I brought your bag, Cupcake. Don't worry so much. I can do this you know. I'm a pretty smart guy.”

“Don't call me that!”

“Okay, so what do you want me to call you then?”

He looked at Alma through the rearview mirror. She was looking through the side window in the car with a contemplative expression. At least the question had made her worry a little less. Then she turned and looked straight at him.

“Princess Prima Ballerina.”

“Princess Prima Ballerina?” he asked, trying to keep a straight face, and she nodded seriously. “Don't you think that's a bit much to say every time I talk to you? Princess Prima Ballerina, you need to get up. Did you have a nice time at school, Princess Prima Ballerina? Princess Prima Ballerina, finish your dinner.”

“Okay!” she interrupted him. “You can call me Cupcake.”

“Sure about that, Princess Prima Ballerina?”

She laughed and gave him a big smile. “You're calling the new baby 'Grain,' what did you call me when I was in Mama's belly?”

“Sprout,” he answered and smiled. “Want me to call you that instead?”

“Maybe. You call Mama Gimp, that's not very nice.”

“That’s true, but she liked it when I called her that when we met, and she still does.”

“Why?” Alma asked with big eyes.

“This is going to sound strange, and I think you have to be a bit older to really understand, but she liked it because I didn’t care about her leg, and in a weird way I showed her that by calling her Gimp.” He turned to the side and could see how Alma seemed to be thinking about what he’d just said. “It was a long time ago, when she was still sad about not being able to dance anymore.”

“Is it kind of like when we call Bear Bear because he looks like one, but we like that he does?”

Mitch laughed out loud, but nodded. “Kind of like that.”

“So you like that Mama’s a gimp?” Her eyebrows were wrinkled.

“In a way. She wouldn’t have been here in Greenville with me if she wasn’t. She’d still be in New York and dancing, and I wouldn’t have her or you. Does that make sense to you?”

“Yes,” she said after a little while. “I think I understand.”

They sat in silence for a while, and Mitch got lost in thoughts of what life would be like if Anna hadn’t come to Greenville—and how he wouldn’t have had Alma, or the new baby that was on its way. When he cleared his throat, she turned her head and smiled and gave him one of her wide-eyed innocent looks.

“Is the gimp thing one of those things I shouldn’t say when other people are around? People who aren’t club.”

“Cupcake, you may look like your mom, but you’ve got my brain,” he smiled.

“That’s a yes.”

“Yup.”

The dance thing took fucking forever, and the only time he even remotely enjoyed it was when Alma was dancing. Between the dances, she was waiting patiently at one of the

chairs alongside the room with her eyes directed at whomever was performing.

The other moms were either eyeing him suspiciously or looked as if they were about to jump him, and given what the other few men there looked like, he couldn't blame them. Actually, in between Alma's performances, he concluded that he and Anna were totally the hottest fucking ballet parents with kids in that class.

Alma disappeared to get changed, and he didn't follow to help her. He'd only made that one mistake once, and the moms had thrown him out like he was some fucking perv. He'd just been trying to help his four-year-old daughter with her clothes for fuck's sake! These days Anna had some deal with another mom, so Alma came out with her bag in her hand and her tutu under her arm.

"Did you take pictures?" she asked, and he picked her up in a hug.

"Sure did. You were great, the best of them!"

She blushed. "Thank you."

"Ready to go to Grandpa and Mel?" Mitch put her back down on the ground.

"I wanna bring the clothes inside and show them, so they can see what I looked like."

"Okay," he agreed.

When they arrived, he let Alma out of the car, picked up her things, and turned towards the house while he tried to find the key in his pocket to lock the car. Brick'd come out to welcome her, and he was standing on the front porch and laughed when he saw Mitch by the car.

"Sorry to tell you, son, but you owe me a hundred bucks," he yelled.

"What?"

"Look at yourself."

Mitch turned around and looked at his reflection in the car, and then he started to laugh.

He had a pink tutu under his arm.

THE END

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About the author:

Lina Andersson was born and raised as far up north as you can go in Sweden. The long, dark winters were made for reading and writing, which is pretty much all she ever did. In her early twenties, she packed up her husband and son and moved to the slightly warmer climate of southern Sweden, where they still live, more than a decade later. When she's not writing, she's an avid gamer and film geek.

The Marauders series, books

Book One: Arrow of Time

Book Two: Perfect Collision

Book Three: Center of Gravity

Book Four: Resonance (TBA)

Marauder Novellas:

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